



## Our changing landscapes?

**G**reat Lakes winters can be long, cold and snowy. This one has been a doozy. So those of us living and working here look forward to escaping for a week or two mid-winter. We head south, way south, counting on the sight of green grass and colorful early spring bloomers to restore our dulled, salt-rusted spirits.

Florida is often our destination of choice. We crave the respite of sunshine and softly swaying palms as avidly as a starving man craves the prospect of a Ryan's buffet.

But even after arriving and breathing in warm coastal breezes, many of us in the landscape business find it impossible to leave our professions behind. The Green Industry surrounds us regardless of where we live or travel. It's a fact that I discovered again during a recent visit to southwest Florida.

Walking the streets in my son's Ft. Myers neighborhood, I was struck by the diversity of residential landscapes there. Precisely trimmed ornamentals and the manicured, uniformly green and weed-free lawns of some of the properties strongly hinted at professional care. Most other properties in the same neighborhood were nice enough — St. Augustine-grass lawns, live oaks, pines, palms, citrus and other typically Florida foliage. These were obviously irrigated and being maintained by their owners.

Several properties, however, stuck out in stark contrast to the others. They had no turfgrass, at least none visible from the street. While neighbors or a passerby might view them as untidy, the residents likely see them as attractive, easy to maintain and environmentally responsible.

These properties, I surmised, were representative of the low-input (reduced mowing, irrigation and chemical use) landscapes advocated by environmental organizations and some governmental agencies. For example, the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences offers a Florida-friendly landscaping guide ([fyn.ifas.ufl.edu](http://fyn.ifas.ufl.edu)) for homeowners and related best manage-



Which type of landscape do you prefer?

(A) A professionally maintained property or (B) A landscape of native and adapted plants requiring fewer inputs?

ment practices (BMPs) for professionals.

These types of landscapes, dominated by stones and drought-tolerant native and regionally adapted plants rather than maintained turfgrass, are becoming the rule and not the exception in the arid U.S. Southwest. Their popularity in Florida (at least judging from the single neighborhood that I walked) doesn't appear that strong yet. This is probably due to the large number of lawn-loving Yanks that have migrated or live there seasonally. Their tastes in landscapes could change, of course.

Regulations directed at the use of potable water for irrigation and fertilizer use on residential properties is growing in Florida. In the end, though, cost could be as big a factor — and not just in the Sunshine State. If the price of water, fuel, chemicals or professional services rises substantially, low-maintenance, low-input landscapes will certainly become more popular.