



## **Builder Meets Florida Water Star<sup>SM</sup> Irrigation Criteria with Vibrant Groundcover**

The landscaping at The Crossings, a new neighborhood in St. Cloud, is more than just beautiful — it's sustainable, requiring less water, fertilizer and maintenance. Thanks to the forward thinking of Hunter Curry, purchasing manager for Highland Homes, these brand-new bungalows, single-family homes and townhomes display vibrant perennial peanut groundcover that needs minimal water.

This shift from front yard turfgrass to groundcover was prompted by Highland Homes' aim to meet Florida Water Star<sup>SM</sup> (FWS) standards where locally mandated, while delivering a product that surpasses new homebuyer expectations.

One of the FWS program standards requires that no more than 60% of a residential home's landscape area can include sprinkler irrigation (i.e., rotor and spray heads), which is traditionally used on turfgrass. This criterion is most often met by builders either expanding plant beds in front and backyards with micro-irrigation or installing unirrigated drought-tolerant turfgrass in the backyards.

Highland Homes not only wanted to achieve this standard but exceed it. The builder worked with the Southwest Florida Water Management District's FWS program manager, landscape architects and their real estate team to identify options that would reduce water use and ensure their customers were pleased with their new landscapes.

"As a scout troop leader and avid outdoorsman, constructing homes that conserve and protect Florida's lakes and water bodies has always been a passion of mine," Hunter Curry said. "Creating new designs and techniques can be challenging with bumps in the road, but I'm proud that our team is working hard to lead the way."

Feedback from homebuyers was that if sprinkler irrigation for turfgrass needed to be reduced, they preferred that irrigation be installed in the backyard to allow for family recreational space. To meet FWS's maximum of 60% sprinkler irrigation, many builders lay unirrigated turfgrass in the backyards and install turfgrass requiring irrigation in the front yard for sidewalk appeal. Additionally, homebuyers preferred groundcover in their front yards to reduce water bill costs and time spent on maintenance such as mowing and fertilizing.

After receiving customer feedback and meeting with contractors, perennial peanut was selected as groundcover for the residential front yards at The Crossings for the following reasons:

- Aesthetic appeal — Perennial peanut has a dense, carpet-like appearance with small yellow flowers that bloom periodically throughout the year. These flowers add visual charm and beauty while attracting pollinators.
- Drought tolerance — It is highly drought-tolerant once established. Highland Homes found perennial peanut uses approximately 7–13” of supplemental irrigation annually compared to turfgrass that requires upwards of 40” of supplemental irrigation each year.
- Low maintenance — Perennial peanut requires minimal mowing (only a few times a year), as it stays relatively low to the ground at about 6–12” tall. Also, unlike turfgrass, because it is a legume, perennial peanut enriches the soil by adding nitrogen naturally, reducing the need for synthetic fertilizers.

While the advantages of perennial peanut are strong, there are also limitations that need to be considered such as:

- Groundcovers such as perennial peanut typically take around six months to fill in a space when planted appropriately at roughly two feet apart. During this period, homebuyers, HOA managers and others need to be made aware that while the initial landscape may look sparse, it will soon be robust and flourishing.
- While perennial peanut requires less mowing, it might need more attention in terms of soil preparation and establishing a dense cover, especially in areas with poor soil quality.
- If the area receives heavy foot traffic or is used frequently for outdoor activities, drought-tolerant turfgrasses may be better suited.
- As with all permits, builders are required to ensure that local ordinances are met by providing design plans to building officials for approval prior to installation.

Aside from groundcovers, there are several varieties of drought-tolerant turfgrasses appropriate for Florida homes and businesses. Depending on consideration of soil type, soil moisture needs and sunlight, varieties include: Bahiagrass, Bermudagrass, Centipedegrass, Seashore Paspalum, St. Augustinegrass and Zoysiagrass. Builders and landscapers should check with their local UF/IFAS Extension office and conduct soil tests to determine the best species of turf in unirrigated areas.

To help ensure landscape and irrigation contractors understand the FWS criteria and how to design landscapes that meet FWS standards, FWS Irrigation and Landscape Accredited Professional (AP) Trainings are scheduled for Jan. 22 in Apopka and Jan. 23 in Lake Wales.

Both groundcovers and drought-tolerant turfgrasses offer sustainable alternatives for new homeowners looking to create low-maintenance, water-efficient landscapes. By selecting the appropriate groundcover or turfgrass based on site conditions, homeowners can reduce water use, minimize chemicals and maintain a healthy and beautiful landscape.

To learn more about FWS or the upcoming FWS AP trainings, visit [FloridaWaterStar.com](http://FloridaWaterStar.com) or contact Robin Grantham at (352) 400-8635 or Deirdre Irwin at (386) 546-8437.