Gardening and landscaping can be frustrating for our Northern friends who spend their winters here. Most newcomers, desiring landscapes that are beautiful and easy to maintain, are understandably bewildered by many challenges. Our plants are unfamiliar. Our winters are mostly mild but punctuated with short periods of freezing temperatures. Many landscaping plants put on their “show” in the summer, after winter folks have returned home. A final challenge is keeping landscapes alive and thriving during sweltering summer months, which can be either dry or rainy!

An important first step is to become familiar with plants that thrive in our location. Our long state is divided into three major climate zones (Zones 8-11), each with unique growing conditions. Our area of northeast Polk County is in Zone 9. It helps to be aware that plants rated for other zones may have more challenges when planted in our area.

Many sources can help familiarize you with our plants. A University of Florida program, Florida-Friendly Landscaping™, is devoted to teaching about appropriate plants and landscaping practices that protect our environment. Polk County’s Master Gardeners can help (Call or visit the Cooperative Extension Office), and you can visit Master Gardener Demonstration Gardens for ideas. Public libraries and local nurseries are also great sources.

Your Florida landscape ideally should include easy-care hardy plants that perform equally well all year. Such evergreen trees and shrubs will provide a winter graced by attractive plantings regardless of freezing temperatures, as well as giving you peace of mind during the summer months while you are gone. Evergreen trees such as holly varieties offer winter red berries. A smallish tree, the Little Gem Magnolia has beautiful foliage which can be used for holiday decorating, and this tree will begin blooming in the Spring. Easy-care evergreen foundation plants include Indian Hawthorn, low spreading Junipers, Giant Evergreen Liriope, and Dwarf Nandina ('firepower' variety). The native Florida Coontie has a very tropical appearance, and is quite hardy.
Once your landscape foundation of hardy evergreens has been established, then you can explore the joys of color! Since our winters are mostly mild, most homeowners enjoy including tropical plants in our yards. Remember that many of them (crotons, ixoras, tropical palms, etc.) are truly Zone 10-11 plants, and they will be vulnerable to cold temperatures. Hibiscus is considered zone 9B but depending on where you live and the winter it can still be susceptible to the cold. One way to include true tropicals in your landscape is to plant them on the south/southeast side of your house where they are more protected. Avoid planting in low spots of your yard. Care must be taken to protect them when the temperatures dip. Another approach is to plant your tropicals in containers, and bring them indoors during a freeze.

When purchasing plants for your landscape, make sure that your selection includes plants that will give you enjoyment while you are here! It is probably not in your best interest to buy plants, for example, that bloom in the summer. From trees to annuals, there are many landscape plants that are easy to grow in our area and have attributes that are highlighted from autumn through mid-spring. Here are just a very few suggestions from the multitudes of wonderful Florida plants to consider:

For autumn color, try a combination of American Beautyberry (purple berries), Pink Muhly Grass, and the bright orange of Gaillardia wildflowers. All of these are Florida native plants. Other autumn color includes Thryallis (yellow) and Knock-Out™ roses.

For winter interest, some deciduous trees that in the north turn color in the fall often show bright January color, such as Florida Red Maple and Turkey Oak. If you have shade, different varieties of camellia can provide color from fall through spring. The Dwarf nandina ‘firepower’, while evergreen, has leaves that turn reddish in cold weather. Dwarf Powderpuff shrub has evergreen leaves and blooms off and on all year.

Spring: In shade or part shade, azaleas provide color, and come in varieties that bloom twice a year. Loropetalum varieties have burgundy leaves all year and early spring pink bloom. Other early spring color comes from Amaryllis, Daylilies, and Society Garlic.

There are many annual plants that provide color during the winter months. Often, annuals are the greatest source of winter color. A few favorites are petunias, snapdragons, and sweet allysum. Local nurseries abound with selections.
It is important to remember that even “easy-care” plants will need some attention during the hot summer months when you are not in residence. Enlist the support of either a knowledgeable landscape service or a neighbor to watch over your plants. Remember that “Low-Care does not mean No-Care”, when it comes to landscape plants! Appropriate irrigation is important; ideally you should have someone monitor the water needs of your landscape to address either very dry or very wet conditions.

With a little planning, your Florida landscape will be waiting for your return enjoyment next Fall!

A good book is:  Yankee’s Guide to Florida Gardening, by Hank and Marlene Bruce