



Season 1 Episode 4 – Landscapes for the Alabama Coast

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Narrator

From the Ground Up, a podcast of the Alabama Extension Home Grounds Team educating you about home landscapes, gardens and home pests.

Brian Brown

Thank you for joining us this week. My name's Brian Brown. I'm the host of From the Ground Up. And this week we are joined by Jack LeCroy. He is a regional extension agent in south west Alabama and he's going to talk about coastal plants. So Jack, welcome!

Jack Lecroy

Hey, Brian. Thanks for having me.

Brian Brown

Tell me a little bit about the Gulf Coast. There's a there's a lot of plants that you can grow down in south Alabama that we can't grow here in north Alabama. Tell us some of the unique characteristics that you deal with down in the Gulf Coast area.

Jack Lecroy

Well, I'll tell you. So I'm originally from north Alabama, so I've gotten kind of a firsthand experience of how different things can be from north Alabama to south Alabama. So I'm currently in Mobile, Alabama, right now, and there's a lot of things that I have learned since being here in 2017. You know, a lot of plants down here, I always tell my clients and my master gardeners that, you know, if you're from another part of the state or another part of the nation, you might as well just go ahead and forget everything that you've learned about gardening, because it's completely different down here.

Jack Lecroy

You have to deal with the extreme heat. You have to deal with hurricanes, you have to deal with humidity. A lot of people don't realize that when you're in the top three yearly for rainfall in North America, which can make things very, very difficult. So that's just a couple of examples of what can be a little difficult trying to garden and do anything horticulture related down here in south Alabama.

Brian Brown

Yeah, I know that a lot of plants are grown down there. So things like azaleas, I know azaleas are huge down in the mobile area. There's a lot of nurseries that grow those and are really just a nurseries to grow in all kinds of plants down there. So it's a very unique environment, but there are some great benefits.

Brian Brown

You know, you get extended grow and seasons, you get a lot of things like that. But there's also the the dangers and the pitfalls that come with gardening in that in that environment.

Jack Lecroy

Oh, yeah. So there's definitely the pros and the cons for sure. Just like with anything, I do enjoy growing citrus now that I didn't get to grow in north Alabama and so, you know, of course I have to not try to grow my dogwoods and red buds because they are prone to certain diseases that we just can't get by with down here in south Alabama.

Jack Lecroy

So if I want to enjoy those, I'm going to go back up to Huntsville in the spring and see the beautiful dogwoods and get my dogwood fix so I can enjoy those and not try to grow those down here in south Alabama. So that's just kind of one example there.

Brian Brown

Yeah. So what kind of plants do grow well down in the environment? And let me ask you this. The Gulf Coast, the immediate Gulf Coast, like Gulf Shores, Orange Beach, that area, how does that differ from the Mobile area where you're located?

Jack Lecroy

This gets into kind of, you know, the different hardiness zones, Mobile and North Mobile County, North Baldwin County. There are a lot different than the south parts of their county. So you've got Dauphin Island in Mobile County, you've got Gulf Shores, Orange Beach in Baldwin County. And when you think about it, there's actually a total zone difference from the north part of those counties to the south part.

Jack Lecroy

And so south part of Mobile in Baldwin County, you've got you starting to get into Nona and the Hardy Innocent. And that's where we really have to consider the salt tolerance of certain plants. A lot of people that move to any

coastal environment, they don't necessarily really think about the salt tolerance. Not all plants can handle salt tolerance.

Jack Lecroy

And so even when you start talking about turf grass, you've got to think about, okay, salt spray from the ocean and kind of the technical definition of determining if a plan of salt tolerance is one eighth of

a mile from the ocean. And so one eighth of a mile from the ocean, that's where you really have to consider the salt tolerance of plants and really take that into consideration before ever putting a plant in the ground.

Jack Lecroy

Now, when you get into the north part of the counties, you can kind of, you know, play around a little bit more and have more variety as far as what you can grow. But we still have to consider a lot of different things as far as as far as plants are concerned. You know, you mentioned azaleas a second ago, so Mobil's actually named the Azalea City.

Jack Lecroy

We have an azalea trail run. We have all of these azalea type of inspired things in mobile. And one thing I try to press upon my clients is there's not just one type of azalea. So you've got azaleas that can grow three feet tall. You have azaleas I call the Formosa Azalea, the VW Bug Azalea because they can get about as big as a VW bug.

Jack Lecroy

You know, that's going to really determine where you put that in your landscape. Definitely don't want that in front of a low window. And so we can we have a lot of variety down here with plants but it really is big on you have to kind of research you know call your extension agent, go to a arboretum, go to a botanical garden, see what's been established for a while.

Jack Lecroy

And that has dealt with a lot of these conditions down here.

Brian Brown

Yeah, that's one thing I suggest when people, you know, what do I put my landscape I always try to mention go to your local garden center or local arboretum, botanical garden just somewhere around in your area and see what they've got going on, see what they have planted and see what's doing well there. So what type of plants do well in Mobile and just the southern part of Alabama?

Jack Lecroy

When I think about this question, because I have a lot of, you know, homeowners, master gardeners that ask me this question. So there's I could give you lists and list of plants. But the one thing that comes to my mind when I think about plants is they have to be tough to grow down here. I'll give you one example.

Jack Lecroy

Afternoon sunlight down here is going to be a little bit different than the afternoon sun, say, in Tennessee. We have, you know, kind of extreme heat down here where in the afternoon you could be pushing, you know, close to 100 or over heat index. And, you know, certain plants they're going to kind of melt. And that afternoon, that afternoon sunlight, I know at the botanical garden here, they have a really large camellia section, which camellias are always fine.

Jack Lecroy

You've got the japonica and then you've got this. The thank was azaleas. You can have a lot of fun with palm trees down here. There's a lot of different plant material down here, you know, kind of just trying to walk myself through my. My own yard. I have, you know, things like pink mullet grass. I have pagoda carpets that an evergreen that I really like that seems to handle a lot more diseases and different pressures down here in south Alabama.

Jack Lecroy

I've got dianella or flax. Lily Of course I have a citrus tree. Satsuma That's one thing that we have to consider. And when I teach any type of fruit tree class down here, you know, not all citrus are created equal. So that's one thing I press upon my clients come quiet and satsuma other most cold hardy citrus. Even just because we're in south Alabama does not mean that we do not get cold every winter can be completely different than the last.

Jack Lecroy

We got pretty cold this year and so planning blood oranges and navel oranges and that type of thing, those are the first ones that really get hit back by freezing temperatures. So you really have to do your research and kind of figure out how much maintenance, how much time do I want to put into these plants? But those are just some kind of examples that I have in my own yard.

Jack Lecroy

But you can have a huge variety of plants in your own landscape.

Brian Brown

So, Jack, you mentioned palm trees, and I think a lot of people don't understand there's actually palms. If you really love palms, there are some palm trees that you can plant, you know, further north. It doesn't have to be coastal plant. So there are hardy palms, right?

Jack Lecroy

There are hardy palms. And so whenever I teach Woody Ornamentals in South Alabama, we do go over palm trees. There are some palm trees, you know, south of Orlando that you're only going to see them, see them south of Orlando. There are other palm trees. You know, I'm originally from Center Alabama. I tell people I spelt the fancy way C.A.R.E.

Jack Lecroy

And there is a I can't I think it might be a sable palm that someone has in their front yard and center Alabama. And, you know, I always think, how did that palm tree acclimate to that? And again, I tell I tell a lot of my clients that plants are like people. So plants, not all plants are created equal.

Jack Lecroy

I get a little more cold. Some like it a little more hot, some do not like cold and do not like hot. And so palms are no different. I've seen many plantings before where some people didn't understand the environment and they went in with several different palms. Let's take a queen Palm, for example. Those are not cold hardy and a lot of them died and palms are not inexpensive.

Jack Lecroy

They can be many thousands of dollars depending on what size you buy. So you really have to figure out exactly what palm tree you want and also the height. They all don't get to the same height. They all have different growth rates. So I always love a palm tree and kind of playing around with the palm trees because that just makes me feel like I'm in a tropical environment.

Jack Lecroy

Some people, if you're not near the coast, they they don't tend to like a palm tree in their yard because it kind of looks out of place. But I always say, you know, if you love palms, then definitely experiment with some of the palm trees that you might have access to.

Brian Brown

So what type of plants do not do well down on the Gulf Coast?

Jack Lecroy

So there are a lot of plants that we have to kind of consider that they might not be as long lived and they might not be as low maintenance as we want. Almost every person I come in contact with, the first thing that they say that they want in their landscape is low maintenance. Yeah. And so I always tell people I'm going to work with

you on low maintenance, but there are certain things that we have to know.

Jack Lecroy

A lot of people that move to the coastal area of Alabama or really any state, they want to bring these plants that they have seen from different areas or they've gotten to grow in another state. Dogwoods, as an example, that's one that gets a fungus pretty bad down here. They're just not long lived. Bred buds are the same way.

Jack Lecroy

If we think about fruit trees, then you've got apples and peach trees. Many of my clients want an apple and a peach tree and you can grow them down here. But you're also going to be on a very rigid spray schedule. Well, if you're not spraying every week, you're spraying every other week, and then things like Leyland Cypress, that's kind of like a very common evergreen tree that there's a disease called bot rot or betrayed us, right?

Jack Lecroy

So that it can get. And when we deal with high humidity, when we deal with 70 plus inches of rain a year, and then let's say someone puts them too close together, things that are prone to fungal and bacterial problems, they're just going to not be very long lived. If we are not taking every precaution necessary in our landscapes and our orchards and our vegetable gardens, that type of thing.

Jack Lecroy

So the biggest thing to deal with down here is just fungal and bacterial problems. We really have to concentrate on air circulation down here on the Gulf Coast.

Brian Brown

So what are some under-utilized plants that folks down there near the coast that really need to incorporate into their landscape are things that you really like that really do well or that you've seen do well down there.

Jack Lecroy

Or one thing and I will kind of go off of the spring that I've had. I've been inundated with lawn calls over the past, you know, two or three months, the big broad grouping of plants that I would I would like more people to utilize or shade plants. And so a lot of times we try to grow grass in areas that grass is just not going to grow, you know, under a lot of oak tree.

Jack Lecroy

We have beautiful live oaks here. We have heavy shade in certain parts of our yard possibly. So I always push people to incorporate more shade plants and stop trying to get grass to grow where it's not going to grow. But things like fa forgive them or I like to call it fa forgive them just because that's fun or more that is more fun to say.

Jack Lecroy

Or the tractor seat plant. There's different things. Like there's a lot of different ferns that we can grow down here. I really like ferns, you know, Heartsong, Fern, Royal Fern I have incorporated a split leaf philodendron into my landscape this past, I think it was this past fall. And so that gives more of that tropical vibe. But, you know, it came back through our winter and they usually come back.

Jack Lecroy

There's a lot of different types of shade plants that that I try to incorporate different things. I've already mentioned one with Poteau Corpus, that's a really good evergreen that I really haven't seen a lot of issues with. I don't really have to prune it, you know, every month or anything like that. So it's pretty low maintenance. And I always tell people any plant that I'm putting into my own landscape or garden, I want it to have a dual purpose.

Jack Lecroy

So I want it to be esthetically pleasing. But if it feeds something else, if it feeds me, if it feeds wildlife, that is a benefit. And so I always try to pick plants that can have two purposes out, you know, one that I have for example, is a pineapple guava. So you can eat the flowers, you can kind of put them as a garnish on a plate.

Jack Lecroy

And they also make a nice kind of hedge with those. And so that's another example of of a plant that, you know, might be underutilized in our area.

Brian Brown

So earlier, you mentioned some of the problems that you experienced down here, you know, natural disasters and things like that heat. And, you know, not only just heat but also cold. We have a huge cold, cold snap back in December. And I'm sure a lot of the plants down there got hit also right now.

Jack Lecroy

For sure. For sure.

Brian Brown

Yeah. So, you know, that's another thing. You know, like you said earlier, dealing with not just the heat but the cold also has a detrimental effect because these plants are not really used to that kind of thing. So what are some other things you mentioned, salt, saltwater tolerance or salt spray tolerance? What about some insects? I know that you've had problems with with snails, right?

Jack Lecroy

Yeah. So last year I started getting a lot of calls. It started in Baldwin County, and there was a snail called the Ghost Bulimulus snail. Never had I come in contact with this. And I had a frantic home owner that had called me and they said, I am inundated with snails. They're crawling up the side of my house.

Jack Lecroy

They're all my fence they're all in my yard. The homeowner sent me some pictures and I was pretty flabbergasted at the number of them. And so I had found a contact that deals with snails and mollusks and got

to talking to them about it. And they were it's actually an invasive species that has moved. They have it in Florida.

Jack Lecroy

It's moving over, you know, into the panhandle now into Baldwin and Mobile County. It's one of those issues that we just don't have a great answer for yet. And I try to press upon a lot of my clients that, you know, yes, we are in the year 2023, but there are still a lot of horticulture questions that we don't have the answers to yet.

Jack Lecroy

And so a lot of my homeowners and clients, they want me to give them a quick spray or something that they can go buy and we just don't have that. So I heard of a lot of innovative yet not probably wise treatments for the snails because people were just really fed up and the the contact that I was working with, they said the best thing that you can do to get rid of them is to get you and several friends together and go start picking them.

Jack Lecroy

And I was like, Ooh, that's going to be not not many people want to hear that answer, unfortunately.

Brian Brown

What are some of the things that you heard that would not work, some of the more ridiculous things.

Jack Lecroy

So I had one that was just I think they had gone and bought just buckets of like pool salt and they were just throwing it out in their yard. And, you know, that kind of deals that kind of gets into a lot of the soil issues. Because if if we don't have the research as to what's going on when we apply our product, then we don't really know what we're doing to the microorganisms and the insects that are already in that soil.

Jack Lecroy

And so you really could be killing a lot of beneficials by applying something that we don't know how to apply. Again, we see a lot of things online that we can make a video look great about. We sprayed this concoction. Look at this beautiful plant. Well, is there really research out there to support it? That's really something we have to consider with really everything that we see nowadays.

Brian Brown

Yeah. Throwing salt on your yard is a very bad idea.

Jack Lecroy

Right? Exactly.

Brian Brown

So, Jack, tell me about some of the unique characteristics about the Alabama Gulf Coast.

Jack Lecroy

Well, I will tell you that I never really spent much time on the Alabama Gulf Coast. When I was in north Alabama, we would always travel Destin or Orlando or somewhere, either going straight to the beach or going to Disney World or something like that. And so I'd never spent much time in Mobile in Baldwin County. And since I've been here since 2017, it's been a real eye opening experience because they call it the Amazon of North America.

Jack Lecroy

And I never knew that before. And so there's an area in between the Bay - Mobile Bay and there's causeway. And on that causeway there is an area called Five Rivers. It's a big outdoor area and it's actually where all five rivers come together in Alabama, the Mobile River, the Spanish River, Tensaw River, Appalachia, and Blakely River.

Jack Lecroy

They all come together and the biodiversity, they say, is one of the most biodiverse areas in all of North America. And when we start talking about salamander snails, crawfish turf rolls, you can see so many species. And so that was kind of an eye opening experience for me when I moved down here, because I never knew that such a biodiverse area and Alabama is very biodiverse in the state regardless.

Jack Lecroy

But I never knew this area really existed until I moved down here and really got a really good glimpse of everything that you can see down here in south Alabama.

Brian Brown

Yeah, I think a lot of people don't understand how special and unique the entire state is. I think we are. I think we may have moved up to number four now in biodiversity and it's just a really unique state. And it really is Alabama, the beautiful It's a it's a beautiful state. I love North Alabama. But, you know, the South Alabama has its beauty, too.

Brian Brown

And such biodiversity is always really unique to see and understand. And when you know and you understand how unique it is, you appreciate it more. And, you know, we encourage people to get outside and go see these things.

Jack Lecroy

Yeah, I mean, I always I always miss because I had spent a lot of time up in Little River Canyon. And so that's kind of where, you know, Gadsden/Centre area that's where I spent a lot of my time. But then still being able to be in the same state and coming down here and being surrounded by the water marshes, just a huge biodiversity, you know, getting to see alligators and all that type of stuff.

Jack Lecroy

It's it's kind of you kind of forget sometimes that you're in Alabama, depending on what part you go through. So it's definitely kind of a secret with, you know, again, my whole life I never really paid attention until it took me moving here to really see the uniqueness of South Alabama.

Brian Brown

Yeah, and I could say the same thing about North Alabama. I lived in Auburn most of my life and, you know, coming up here to north Alabama, you know, every every morning I drive across the causeway into Guntersville and it's just really unique to see, you know, not just the plant life, but, you know, especially the the ducks and and the birds that are along the lake.

Brian Brown

It just it changes every week. There's a new species of bird that's coming in and they flock there on the lake. So it's really it's really neat to see throughout the season things changing.

Jack Lecroy

Oh, for sure. For sure. It's I tell people, if you ever go to a certain area, like if you go to a park or you go to kind of a outdoor recreation area, go every season because usually you're going to see something completely different depending on the season and the time of year.

Brian Brown

Yeah, So get out there, explore our beautiful state, go go to the Gulf Coast and and see the plant life and see the wildlife. It's it's a fun thing to do. So what are some things that you would want a homeowner to know that's either moving into the area or just curious about things that they can use in their yard or garden?

Jack Lecroy

That is a good question. So I would definitely say take it slow and do your research again, if you're from another part of the state. And even, you know, when I teach, I always say, if you're from Birmingham, if you're from Huntsville, yes, that is the same state, but it is completely different. And so, you know, plants that you might have been able to grow there, you might still not be able to get away with them.

Jack Lecroy

Down here in south Alabama. I tell a lot of people all the time, my job is to help save you time and money. And I try to do that by helping you make the best decision. So one thing I try to get my homeowners to realize is just the amazing amount of rainfall that we get that causes a it's a good thing.

Jack Lecroy

But on the other side, it can be a bad thing if we have made wrong decisions in our landscape. So if we had planted plants too close together, if we have an irrigation system, you know, you're going to have to be mindful. I can't tell you how many times I drive through neighborhoods and businesses and their irrigation systems are on and it's coming a four inch rain.

Jack Lecroy

And I think that's pretty common. We see a lot of that a lot of different times. But there are devices you can put on your irrigation system for it to cut off if it senses rain. Just get to know your environment and, you know, talk to seasoned gardeners, talk to different people that have been in the area.

Jack Lecroy

You know, talk to us. We can definitely help you with that because, you know, if you don't want to put the amount of time into spraying weekly for apple trees, well, we might have to go with something different. Everybody always asks what type of fruit trees are low maintenance here. I always say figs, persimmons and citrus. Those are the three most low maintenance down here as far as fruit trees are concerned.

Jack Lecroy

Everything else, you're going to have to put a lot more time into trying to get that fruit from. So just learning a couple of things along the way.

Brian Brown

Well, Jack, thanks for joining us today. We appreciate your insight on living in the Gulf Coast and south Alabama. So, as always, if you have any questions, feel free to reach out to any of us agents and we'll be glad to help. So until next time. Thanks.

Jack Lecroy

Thanks for.

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From the ground up as a production of the Alabama Cooperative Extension System.