

Lizards are a sign of a healthy yard and hard to beat for controlling pests
By: Corine Burgess

Folks that aren't from around here are always fascinated and sometimes horrified by the abundance of lizards we have in Florida. These miniature dinosaur look-a-likes are common and quite useful to our yards. Though many may consider them a nuisance, having lizards in the area reduces pest populations and indicates a healthy landscape.

There are about 10 native species of lizards. Unfortunately, they are sadly outnumbered by the invaders that have come here from other places. The problem with these visitors is that they eat the bugs, use the space and generally overtake the natives.

Of all the natives, perhaps the Green Anole is the most common. Most people know it by the color changes from a bright green to a plain brown color. This camouflaging technique helps them blend in when predators approach or when they are going after prey. Often mistaken for the non-native chameleon, green anole's color change is the result of heat and sunlight. At lower temperatures, anoles remain dark; but once in the sun for a while, they turn bright green. The tiny creatures generally dwell in shrubs and trees. They are five to eight inches in length and the males display a bright pink dew lap, which is a flap of skin that expands out from the underside of the neck, when it wants a date or is trying to drive off a competitor.

The females lay eggs from spring to fall. They deposit their eggs about every two weeks in moist leaf litter or soft soil. The tiny ¼ inch, white eggs hatch in about five to seven weeks. Once grown, lizards live for about one year.

Skinks are different in appearance than most lizards. The secretive Southeastern Five-lined Skink is the native species in our county. They love the Florida climate and cannot tolerate cold weather. They can grow up to 9 inches long, are very shiny, have tiny arms and legs and their bodies are cylindrical. Often mistaken for snakes, they have beautiful, intricate, colorful patterns on their smooth bodies. Another snakelike characteristic is the flicking of their tongues. When skinks are young they appear dark blue to almost black with bright blue tails. Adults appear more brownish. The stripes on their streamlined bodies can range in color from light blue to yellow.

They dig burrows to protect themselves and stay cool. They also have the ability to lose their tail when a predator grabs them, which allows them to escape. From May to July they lay from nine to twelve eggs in damp soil, rotten logs or stumps; basically a dark, moist place that provides shelter and food. Males can be distinguished from females by observing their behavior. Males will run around with their mouths open toward another skink; if it attacks, it's a male; if it doesn't move or runs away, it's a female.

The Six-lined Racerunner is a bit larger in size. They can grow up to 10 ½ inches and six light-colored lines run down their sleek, dark bodies from head to tail. The difference between male and female is determined by the coloration on their underside. Males have light blue while females have white bellies. These lizards sport a tail that is twice the length of their bodies. They are generally found on the ground and they prefer dry habitats. They are extremely fast

runners and have been clocked at speeds of 18 mph. They lay their eggs in summer and the juveniles will hatch about six weeks later. Usually the female racerunner lays another clutch of eggs several weeks after the first batch.

Perhaps one of the most interesting of these mini reptiles is the Florida scrub lizard. These lizards are small, gray to gray-brown with spiny scales. The adults only grow to be about five inches long. A large brown stripe runs down each side of their bodies from the neck to the tail. As with the racerunner, the males have different coloration than the females. Male's undersides are marked with bright turquoise splotches on the sides of their bellies. They also have a black throat with small turquoise patches at the base. The females generally lack these bright colors on their bodies.

Mating begins in February. Clutches of two to eight eggs are generally laid from April to August. A single female may lay eggs as many as five times in a season. The eggs take about 75 days to hatch. The young lizards reach maturity in about 10 months.

As their name would indicate, the Florida scrub lizard lives nowhere else but in the sunshine state. They prefer dry upland scrubby areas as well as sandhill communities. They love the sun and need lots of open, sandy spaces. They are not particularly fond of climbing and are usually found foraging on the ground. They can be seen sunning themselves on logs or other objects such as fallen vegetation or rocks. They enjoy a diet of insects, spiders and other small arthropods.

Whatever their variety, all lizards are reptiles, meaning they are cold-blooded, lay eggs and are covered with scales. Some live in trees, others in burrows and some are ground loving. They are fascinating creatures and come in all sizes, colors and are equipped with some interesting features. All lizards are equipped with movable eyelids and external ear holes.

Even though lizards may give some people the creeps or just be considered a nuisance, they are actually good to have around. All native lizards are harmless and none has ever been known to attack a human! As far as pest control, a lizard is hard to beat. Watching the tiny prehistoric looking creatures can provide an interesting experience and provide the kids with hours of fun!