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A Long-Awaited Opening: Oyster Beds Reopen on Apalachicola Bay

The reopening of the oyster beds in Apalachicola marks a significant moment for Apalachicola Bay and the coastal communities that have long depended on its waters. After years of closure intended to allow the bay's depleted oyster populations to recover, state officials have determined that conditions have improved enough to cautiously resume harvesting under strict management guidelines.

The closure followed a prolonged period of environmental stress that included reduced freshwater flow into the bay, storm damage, and declining oyster habitat. During that time, restoration efforts focused on rebuilding reef structure, improving water quality, and allowing juvenile oysters the time needed to mature. Officials emphasized that the reopening does not signal a full return to historic harvest levels, but rather a carefully measured step toward long-term sustainability.

For local oystermen,



the reopening represents a long-awaited return to a way of life deeply rooted in the region's history. Oyster harvesting has shaped Apalachicola for generations, supporting families, fueling local seafood houses, and contributing to the area's cultural identity. The closure forced many in the industry to find alternative work, creating economic strain that rippled through the community.

Seafood businesses and

restaurants are also welcoming the news, as Apalachicola oysters have long been regarded as a signature product of the Forgotten Coast. While harvest limits remain in place, even a limited supply allows local businesses to reconnect with customers seeking a taste of the bay's renowned oysters and supports the gradual rebuilding of the local seafood economy.

Community leaders and marine experts stress that the reopening is only one phase in an

ongoing recovery process.

Continued monitoring, responsible harvesting practices, and environmental stewardship will be essential to protecting Apalachicola Bay in the years ahead. For now, the reopening offers a sense of cautious optimism—one rooted in resilience, cooperation, and hope for the future of a bay that remains central to the life and livelihood of the Forgotten Coast.

'Tuesdays @ 2' Series: Launches at Area Libraries

The Bay County Public Library and the Port St. Joe Library are teaming up to bring a fresh dose of lifelong learning to the community with a new program called "Tuesdays @ 2." Designed for curious minds of all ages, the series offers free, engaging presentations every Tuesday afternoon, giving residents an easy way to learn something new without the pressure of a long-term commitment.

Each session in the Tuesdays @ 2 series will spotlight a different topic, ranging from local history and arts to technology tips, health awareness, and practical life skills. The goal is simple: make learning accessible, social, and fun. Programs are led by guest speakers, local experts, and library staff, continuing a mix of informative and interactive experiences that appeal to a wide audience.

LIBRARY

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Check out "Diane's Keys to the Coast - Discover life in St. George Plantation" on page 6



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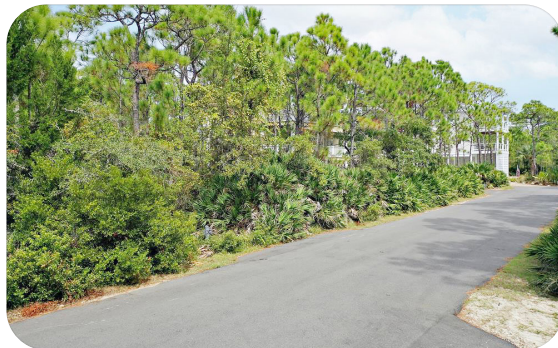
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St. Joseph Bay Humane Society: Offering Pets A Second Chance at Home

The St. Joseph Bay Humane Society has long been a cornerstone of animal welfare in Gulf County, providing a safe haven for dogs and cats in need while working tirelessly to find them permanent, loving homes. As a nonprofit organization, the shelter steps in for animals that have been abandoned, neglected, or surrendered, ensuring they receive care, compassion, and a second chance.

Each animal that comes through the shelter's doors is treated as an individual. Pets receive daily care, socialization, and necessary medical attention, including vaccinations and spay or neuter services whenever possible. Volunteers and staff spend time getting to know each animal's personality, energy level, and needs, which helps create thoughtful matches between pets and adopters. This approach not only improves adoption success but also ensures families are welcoming a companion that truly fits their lifestyle.

Adoption remains at the

heart of the humane society's mission. Choosing to adopt from St. Joseph Bay Humane Society means giving an animal a fresh start while also helping free up space and resources to rescue another pet in need. From playful puppies and kittens to calm, affectionate adult pets, the shelter is home to animals of all ages waiting for someone to choose them. Adoption fees help support ongoing rescue efforts, making each adoption part of a larger cycle of care and compassion.

The organization also plays an important role beyond the shelter walls. Through community education, partnerships with local veterinarians, and support for responsible pet ownership, the humane society works to reduce pet overpopulation and improve the overall well-being of animals throughout the region. None of this work is possible without community involvement, whether through volunteering, fostering, donating, or spreading the

Meet Koda, Our Featured Pet of the Week



Koda was found in February 2024, wandering alone in a remote area—frightened, nervous, and covered in ticks. With two years of patience and kindness from the staff and volunteers at St. Joseph Bay Humane Society, Koda has truly blossomed.

Today, he's a polite treat taker, a rising star at leash walking, and an enthusiastic "sit" and "down" learner—especially when cookies are involved. He keeps his kennel spotless and lights up whenever staff or volunteers stop by, clearly craving human connection.

Looking for a devoted buddy with exceptional snuggling skills? Koda may be your perfect match.

Call the St. Joseph Bay Humane Society at (850) 227-1103 to learn more and schedule a meet-and-greet with Koda... the Bestest Boy!

**SAINT JOSEPH BAY
HUMANE SOCIETY**

word about adoptable pets.

For anyone considering adding a furry family member, the humane society encourages residents to visit the shelter, meet the animals, and consider adoption first. By opening a home and a heart to a shelter pet, adopters gain a loyal com-

panion and help change an animal's life forever. At St. Joseph Bay Humane Society, every adoption is a success story—and the next one could begin with a simple visit.

Gadson's Market: A New Farmer's Market Planned to Support Local Farmers in Apalachicola

A fresh new gathering spot for local growers and makers is coming soon to Apalachicola. Plans are underway for a new green market that will give area farmers, artisans, and specialty vendors a dedicated place to share their goods with the community, strengthening the region's local food and small-business scene.

The future market will feature a variety of specialties, with an emphasis on locally grown produce, handcrafted items, and unique products that reflect the character of the area. Organizers envision a welcoming, community-focused space where residents and visitors alike can shop fresh, support local vendors, and connect directly with the people who grow and create what they sell.

Beyond shopping, the green market is expected to become



a social hub—one that celebrates sustainability, small agriculture, and Apalachicola's strong sense of local pride. By offering a consistent locale for vendors, the market will make it easier for farmers and specialty producers to reach cus-

tomers while giving shoppers a reliable destination for fresh and thoughtfully made goods. More details, including an opening timeline and vendor opportunities, will be announced soon. Those interested in learning more or

getting involved can contact Constance Peck at 720-988-4180 for additional information. The market will be located at Ave E. and Eleventh Street from 9 am to 1 pm on the second and fourth Saturday of each month.

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Book Review: Unbroken By Laura Hillenbrand



REVIEW BY JACK SMITH



Every Summer I like to go to my home library and reread some of my favorites. Any publication by Laura Hillenbrand is among those “must be read again.” I first discovered her by reading “Seabiscuit,” the story of the American depression and a small horse that helped the people survive that era. I did not think she could ever equal that work of art until I read “Unbroken,” the story of Louis Zamperini, a former juvenile delinquent turned Olympic athlete turned prisoner of war. In this book, Hillenbrand

breaks the unwritten code for American authors to downplay the atrocities of the Japanese during World War Two. Think of the Bataan Death March and the brutal treatment of prisoners of war etc. Modern authors tend to write about the unforgivable sin of unleashing the atomic bomb, which saved millions of American lives, without including these other details for context. The book shows us the underbelly of war through the eyes

of Louis Zamperini and his bomber crew who were shot down and suffered unspeakable tortures as POWs. The real story is man’s ability to survive the unthinkable. After the war, Louis returns a vengeful, broken man who turns to alcohol, abuses his family and exhibits all the symptoms of what we now know to be PTSD. It’s also the story of men, like my father, who were able to put aside the horrors of the war and help build a new country.

Zamperini’s wife, Cynthia, goes to hear a young evangelist preacher who she believes can finally help Louis. Threatening divorce she makes Louis attend a tent revival meeting and hear the preacher. After leaving the meeting Louis returned home a changed man who spends the rest of his life teaching the “act of forgiveness” all over the world. As a historical note, the young preacher’s name was Billy Graham.

libraries hope to create a welcoming routine where neighbors can gather, share ideas, and stay engaged with what’s happening in their community. The relaxed afternoon format also makes it ideal for retirees, remote workers with flexible schedules, and anyone looking to break up their week with something enriching.

Tuesdays @ 2 is free and open to the public, with no registration required unless noted for special programs. Community members are encouraged to check their local library’s calendar for weekly topics and locations. With this new series, Bay and Port St. Joe libraries continue to reinforce their role as vibrant community hubs—proving that learning doesn’t stop after school, it just gets more interesting.

LIBRARY

continued from page 1

Library organizers say the series is about more than just education—it’s about connection. By hosting sessions at a consistent day and time, the

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What Good Design Really Does for Small Businesses



BY CARA GOODMAN, OWNER OF CEB DESIGN STUDIO

For many small business owners, “design” is often treated as an afterthought—something you deal with once the logo is finished or the website is live. But in reality, design is one of the most powerful business tools you have. It shapes first impressions, builds trust, and directly influences whether someone chooses to work with you or clicks away to a competitor.

Good design isn’t about trends or decoration. It’s about communication. Every color choice, font, image, and layout decision is either helping tell your story—or creating confusion. And in a digital world

where attention spans are short, confusion is costly.

First Impressions Happen Faster Than You Think

Your website and brand are often the first interaction someone has with your business. Before they read a single word, visitors subconsciously evaluate whether your business feels professional, credible, and relevant to them. This judgment happens in seconds.

If your site feels cluttered, outdated, or inconsistent, visitors may not be able to articulate what’s wrong—but they’ll feel it. On the flip side, clean design, clear structure, and thoughtful visuals instantly signal legitimacy. Good design quietly reassures people that you know what you’re doing and that you’re worth their time.

Design Creates Clarity (and Clarity Drives Action)

One of the biggest problems we see with small business websites is not a lack of information—but too much of it, presented without structure. Good

design creates hierarchy. It guides the eye, prioritizes what matters most, and leads visitors step by step toward an action.

Whether that action is booking a consultation, filling out a form, or making a purchase, effective design removes friction from the process. Clear calls to action, intentional spacing, readable typography, and logical flow all work together to make decisions feel easy. When design is done right, users don’t have to think—they just move.

Design Directly Impacts Perceived Value

Two businesses can offer the same service at the same price, but the one with cohesive branding and a well-designed website will almost always be perceived as more valuable. Humans naturally associate visual polish with professionalism, experience, and quality.

Consistent branding—across your website, social media, print materials, and email marketing—tells customers that you’re established and reliable. It shows that you care about the details, and customers as-

sume that same care extends to your products or services. This perceived value often allows businesses to charge more, attract better clients, and compete more confidently in crowded markets.

Good Design Supports Growth, Not Just Launch

Many small businesses invest in design once, then never revisit it. But as your business evolves, your brand and website should evolve with it. What worked when you were just starting out may no longer support where you’re headed.

Strategic design helps you scale. It ensures your messaging stays aligned, your systems remain efficient, and your digital presence continues to support new offerings, audiences, and goals. A well-built website should grow with your business—not hold it back.

Design Is a Business Tool, Not Decoration

At CEB Design Studio, we believe design should work as hard as you do. Every brand and website we create is built

with intention—rooted in strategy, user experience, and real-world business goals. Design isn’t just about how things look; it’s about how they perform.

In this monthly column, we’ll break down the design decisions that actually move the needle for small businesses. We’ll talk about common mistakes, missed opportunities, and simple improvements that can have a big impact. Whether you’re launching something new or refining what you already have, understanding good design can help you build a stronger, more profitable business.

If your brand or website isn’t clearly communicating your value—or converting visitors into customers—it’s not a failure. It’s an opportunity. And it usually starts with better design.

For any design or website needs please contact me at carab1203@gmail.com and I would love to talk about growing your brand together.



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Real Estate

Diane's Keys to the Coast: Unlocking Life at St. George Plantation



BY DIANE PEEVY

Tucked away on the western end of St. George Island, St. George Plantation is one of the most exclusive and naturally beautiful coastal communities on Florida's Forgotten Coast. Designed for those who value privacy, preservation, and refined island living, this gated neighborhood offers a rare blend of luxury and unspoiled surroundings.

Spanning approximately 1,200 acres, St. George Plantation was intentionally planned to protect the island's natural landscape. With more than five miles of private Gulf-front beach, residents enjoy wide, uncrowded shorelines, rolling dunes, and a sense of tranquility that's increasingly hard to find. From the moment you enter through the guarded gate with 24-hour security, it's clear this community prioritizes peace, space, and exclusivity.

A Community Rooted in Nature

What sets St. George Plantation apart is its commitment to preservation. Native vegetation, maritime forests, and protected dunes surround the neighborhood, creating a set-



ting that feels both secluded and timeless. Winding roads, shaded walking paths, and scenic boardwalks encourage residents to slow down and connect with the outdoors. It's a place where nature isn't just a backdrop — it's part of everyday life.

Homes Designed for Island Living

Homes within the Plantation reflect classic coastal architecture paired with modern comfort. Elevated designs, metal roofs, expansive porches, and generous windows allow homeowners to capture Gulf breezes and water views. Strict architectural guidelines help maintain a cohesive aesthetic while protecting long term value.

From a market standpoint, St. George Island continues to show strong demand and stability. There are currently 94 active homes for sale across the

island, and in 2025, 75 homes sold, reflecting steady transaction volume despite limited inventory. The average sales price in 2025 exceeded \$1.2 million, with entry-level homes selling in the low \$400,000s and luxury properties reaching just over \$4 million. This range highlights the diversity of opportunities available, from charming island retreats to premier Gulf-front estates.

Resort-Style Amenities Without the Crowds

St. George Plantation offers a thoughtful collection of amenities designed to enhance daily living without overwhelming the natural setting. Residents enjoy two community swimming pools, a clubhouse with fitness facilities, tennis and pickleball courts, and more than 12 miles of walking and biking trails. Boardwalks provide easy access to the beach, while a private kayak launch

connects residents to Apalachicola Bay. The community even features a private airstrip, a rare amenity that adds to its unique appeal.

A Lifestyle That Feels Restorative

Life at St. George Plantation moves at a calmer pace. Days are spent biking shaded trails, fishing quiet waters, paddleboarding along the coast, or enjoying peaceful sunset walks on the beach. Despite its secluded feel, the Plantation is just a short drive from island shops, restaurants, and local events.

Ready to Unlock Island Living?

If St. George Plantation feels like the kind of community you've been searching for — or if you're exploring real estate anywhere on St. George Island or Florida's Forgotten Coast — The Peevys are here to help.



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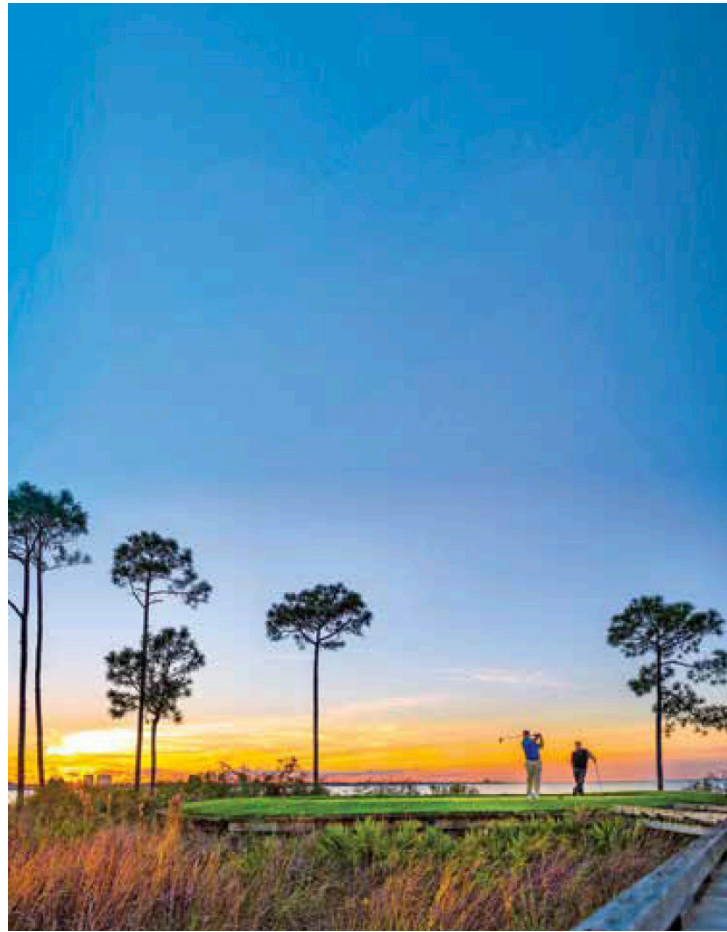
BY ALAN M. WATSON, PRESIDENT, GOLF+ PCB

The title says it all. I've been playing golf for forty-five years, and yes, I've never made a hole-in-one. Of course, I've come close a few times—very close a couple of times. I've holed out for eagle from the fairway, chipped in around the green, and even driven the green on a par 4. But no one ever asks about those very minor accomplishments. The one metric that even non-golfers seem to know about and ask is, "How many holes-in-one have you made?"

So now that we've gotten that out of the way, let's talk about why it matters—or more appropriately, why it doesn't. Thank goodness a hole-in-one isn't a gauge of skill or the only reason we play the sport; otherwise, I would have stopped years ago. Why does a hole-in-one matter? Truthfully, it doesn't, but it is very cool. I was there a couple of years ago when a friend made one on number four at Highland Oaks (Marshwood) in

Dothan, Alabama. I still remember the shot, the way it hit and backed up into the hole. I remember the screaming and the excitement. It was electric. It was a lot of fun to be a part of and to witness. Now, I sincerely doubt that the event will be recorded on his grave marker or mentioned in his eulogy; however, as golf events go, it was great. And I was so proud and happy for him and glad that I got to see it.

But maybe—just maybe—the almighty hole-in-one doesn't matter. I think more golfers consider handicap the ultimate measuring stick when it comes to skill. You see videos, books, and magazine articles about "How to Break 90," "How to Break 80," and the Holy Grail, "How to Break 70." Most golfers would much rather improve their scores consistently than make a random hole-in-one. Some golfers even consider it an amazing day when they play all 18 holes with just one ball rather than losing a few sleeves like most rounds.



Sure, there are hole-in-one contests at most charity golf scrambles, but how often does anyone cash in? Not often, from

what I've seen. The long drive contest and the closest to the pin are much better received and accessible to all golfers.

If I could shoot around par for the rest of my life or make a hole-in-one each year, I would take the low scoring average for sure. I wonder what you would do.


Plus, the worst part of making a hole-in-one is that the reward—or rather the punishment—is that the person who did the deed must buy everyone a round of drinks. Seems silly to me. You make the shot of your life, and it costs you a bar tab. That never happens when you shoot the low score and win the match—quite the opposite, usually. So I'll just keep trying to beat my best score, or maybe my last score, and leave the magic-trick shots to someone else. After all, I've gone forty-five golfing years without one so far, so I'm pretty sure I can equal that feat for the next forty-five. Fairways and Greens!



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BY CAPTAIN KRISTA

If you've been anywhere near Apalachicola Bay lately, you've probably noticed something special in the air — yes, the oyster tongs are back -- and the oyster industry is officially open for business. After years of closures, restoration, and a whole lot of patience, seeing tongers hauling up healthy oysters again feels like saltwater nostalgia.

Why Fishermen Are Smiling (and Should Be)

This isn't just an oyster story — it's a fishing story. Oysters are the unsung heroes of the bay. Every reef is a living filter, cleaning the water, improving clarity, and creating the kind

of habitat fish love. Cleaner water means healthier grass beds, better forage, and stronger populations of redfish, trout, flounder, sheepshead, and more.

In plain fisherman terms: good oysters = good fishing.

The oyster reefs of any area offer a number of benefits: they break current, hold bait, and give juvenile fish a safe place to grow up before they start stealing your bait and running drag. When oysters thrive, the entire food chain shows up to the party.

FUN FACT: Did you know: A single oyster can filter up to 50 gallons of water per day. Oysters are filter feeders; they pump water over their gills, trapping food (like algae) and particles in mucus. This process removes excess nutrients, silt, and harmful algae, preventing oxygen depletion in the water.

A Win for the Watermen

Seeing oystermen back on

the water matters just as much as seeing fish on the flats. This bay has always been a working waterfront, and has provided employment for my own family since at least the 1800's. The reopening means livelihoods restored, traditions passed down again, and offers a little boost to the local economy from its own local resources.

And the early reports are promising. Restoration efforts are paying off, and Mother Nature is finally getting a little breathing room. And, when the oystermen cull their catches as part of the harvesting process, the barnacles released back onto the reefs attract fish like black drum and sheepshead to the area.

Before the oyster crisis, the Apalachicola Bay was a busy fishery, with limits often caught early enough in the day that fishing trips targeting quite a number of species in a single outing, and it was not uncommon to catch spanish mackerel and cobia in the middle of the bay. The oyster reefs were our "honey holes" and we fished

them daily. While both the fish and the fishermen have adapted throughout recent years, it's exciting to see the bay reopen, the oyster bags filling and hope rising that our bay is once again becoming the fishery that has provided for so many of us, for generations.

Now, don't let hope for returned perfection discourage you from enjoying the amazing fishery that still employs my family to this day, over 130 consecutive years, and counting. Because these cool winter months are actually the best time to catch one of the biggest fish you will catch inshore in this area: the "bull" redfish. Yes, that's correct. This is the time of year when the big red drum are close to shore and ready to test any angler's stamina. So, be sure your drag is set correctly before you cast, and prepare to have a blast!

When fishing near oyster reefs, you are likely to also catch the cousin of the red drum, the black drum, which is an equally exciting challenge. Catching these prehistoric

looking oyster-connoisseurs is a good sign that the oysters are back, surviving and thriving!

The Big Picture: Healthy oysters don't just feed families and restaurants — they support the entire ecosystem that anglers depend on. From clearer water to stronger fisheries, this reopening is a rising tide kind of moment.

So here's to full oyster bags, bent rods, and an Apalachicola Bay that's reminding everyone why it's one of the most special fisheries on the Gulf Coast. If the oysters are happy, the fish aren't far behind — and neither are we.

Tight lines... and pass the hot sauce.

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Meet The Peevys - A Family Legacy Built on the Coast

Since 1998, the Peevy name has been synonymous with trusted real estate guidance along Florida's Forgotten Coast. What began as a leap of faith has grown into a multi-generation family team known for integrity, local expertise, and genuine relationships that extend far beyond the closing table.

Bill and Diane Peevy's journey started on St. George Island after relocating from Peachtree City, Georgia. As former successful business owners in Atlanta, they brought with them a strong foundation in marketing, negotiation, and client service. It didn't take long for that experience to translate into real estate success. Within a short time, Bill and Diane earned Top Producer status and quickly became respected voices in the local market. After falling in love with the area's culture, people, and pace of life, they officially made Port St. Joe their home in 1999. Diane's expertise later earned national recognition when she was exclusively featured in Money Magazine for her insight into the Cape San Blas



real estate market.

The next chapter began when Matt Peevy met Ashley, a native of Colquitt, Georgia in 2004 on Cape San Blas—an unmistakable sign that real estate, family, and the coast would forever be intertwined. In 2012, the two were married at sunset along the Windmark Beach boardwalk, overlooking the very shoreline that continues to shape their lives and careers. As second-generation agents, Matt and Ashley quick-

ly followed in Bill and Diane's footsteps, becoming Top Producers early in their careers after earning their real estate licenses in 2014.

Their knowledge and approachable style soon caught national attention. Matt and Ashley were featured on two HGTV series, including Beach Hunters and How Close Can I Beach?, guiding buyers through Bay, Walton, Franklin, and Gulf counties in search of both dream homes and smart

coastal investments. While the cameras added excitement, the heart of the work remained the same—helping families find the right place to call home at the beach.

Recognition followed. From Berkshire Hathaway HomeServices Leading Edge Society to Chairman's Circle Platinum—placing the team among the top 1% globally—the Peevy Team's accolades reflect consistent performance and trusted client relationships.

Still, you're more likely to hear them say, "It's just another day in paradise."

Today, the Peevy Team stands as the Forgotten Coast's most trusted family real estate team and proud community members. In March 2024, they opened their own Mega Agent Office with Keller Williams Success Realty in downtown Port St. Joe, continuing their commitment to excellence while mentoring the next generation of real estate professionals.

If you're dreaming of a coastal lifestyle, aspiring to join the team, or simply looking for guidance from people who truly know this place—the Peevy Team would be honored to help your family begin the next chapter at the beach! Learn more about the Peevys at www.CallThePeevys.com

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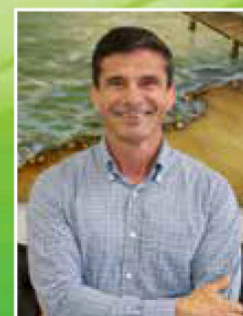
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FRIDAY, JANUARY 23rd	3:30-3:45pm Cluck that Came from Butt Contest
8am Team setup continues	5:30pm Awards Ceremony
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Let's Get Growing: Coontie in the Florida Landscape



BY LAUREN GOLDSBY

Coontie (*Zamia integrifolia*) is the only cycad native to the United States. Cycads often resemble palms, like the sago palm (*Cycas revoluta*), or ferns, as coontie does, but they are not closely related to either. These ancient plants have existed since the time of dinosaurs.

Today, coontie fits well into a wide range of landscapes and is commonly used in both residential and public spaces. It tolerates a variety of sun conditions, has high drought tolerance, and moderate salt tolerance, making it well suited for our area. Coontie grows slowly and doesn't typically require much maintenance. Cold

snaps may cause leaves to drop, but plants can survive temperatures below 20 degrees F.

Unlike most landscape plants, coontie does not produce flowers. Instead, male plants produce pollen-filled cones, while female plants produce cones that contain seeds. These cones often go unnoticed, tucked into the crown of the plant, until winter, when the outer brown layer cracks open to reveal bright orange and red seeds inside.

Like other cycads, all parts of the coontie plant are toxic to mammals. If you have young children or curious pets, seed cones can be removed and discarded.

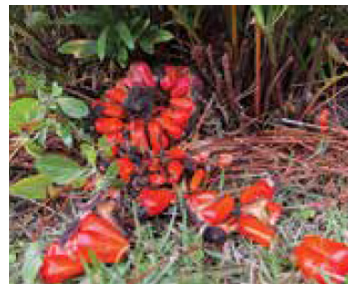
Kept safely away from food items, seeds may also be collected, dried for several weeks, and stored until planting in spring. As temperatures warm, the fleshy seed coating can be removed, and seeds can be soaked overnight in water to help speed germination. Seeds left in the landscape may also germinate naturally over time.

Much like the relationship



between monarch butterflies and milkweed, the atala butterfly (*Eumaeus atala*) relies exclusively on coontie as its host plant. The toxins present in coontie accumulate in the caterpillars' bodies, making them unpalatable to predators. Atala butterflies were thought to be extinct from 1937 until 1959 due to widespread loss of coontie habitat. Through focused conservation efforts and renewed planting of coontie, populations slowly began to recover. Today, atala butterfly colonies have been documented as far north as Gainesville,

Florida.



While atalas are not yet common in our area, populations may continue to expand, particularly in coastal regions where suitable host plants are available. We'll be keeping an eye on the coonties in our

demonstration gardens for signs of caterpillars. Including coontie in your landscape may provide habitat for a passing butterfly and help support a small but meaningful piece of Florida's native ecology.

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JAN 16- FEB 13 CURATE 2026 "STEP INTO MY STUDIO" AT ST. JOE CENTER FOR PERFORMING ARTS

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Wellness

New Year, New You: Skin Tips to Bring into 2026



By BRIDGET SULLIVAN, PA-C, COASTAL SKIN SURGERY AND DERMATOLOGY

The new year brings new beginnings, fresh starts, and New Year's resolutions. Your skin is the largest organ of the body, and your face is your walking billboard. Healthy, glowing skin is not achieved through quick fixes, but through thoughtful habits that support skin function year-round. Let 2026 be the year you incorporate skin health and wellness into your routine. Below are some simple tips to carry into the new year.

Washing your face may sound simple, but cleansing morning and night can make

a big difference in the appearance and health of your skin. Washing twice daily removes dirt, oil, and environmental pollutants that accumulate on the skin throughout the day and night.

Wearing sunscreen daily is another essential habit. Applying an SPF 30 or higher every day helps combat premature aging and significantly reduces the risk of skin cancer. Making sunscreen part of your daily routine is one of the most effective ways to protect your skin long term.

Incorporating antioxidants and retinoids into your skin-care regimen can also improve overall skin health. Antioxidant ingredients, such as vitamin C serum, help protect against environmental damage while brightening the complexion. Retinoids, like tretinoin, increase skin cell turnover and help improve fine lines, wrinkles, and sun damage.

Annual skin cancer screenings are an important part of preventive care. One in five Americans will develop skin



cancer in their lifetime. Regular screenings allow abnormal lesions to be identified early, often in the precancerous stage or superficial layers of the skin, when treatment is most effective.

Lifestyle habits play a critical role in skin health as well. Adequate sleep allows the skin to repair itself, while a balanced diet rich in fruits, vegetables, lean proteins, and healthy fats supports the skin from within. Stress reduction through exercise, time with family and friends, and mindfulness can also decrease inflammation and reduce flare-ups of certain skin conditions.

The key to skin health and

wellness is consistency—making small daily steps that turn into healthy habits over time. Just like diet and exercise, results are not seen overnight, but with patience and consistency, the payoff is healthier, more resilient skin. As you welcome 2026, commit to caring for your skin with purpose and intention. A “new you” begins with healthy habits, and your skin will reflect that dedication all year long.

I wish you and your loved ones a happy New Year, and I hope that 2026 is the best one yet.



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The Psychology of Flooring: How it Affects your Home's Atmosphere

BY AUBRIE ROUNDS | MARKETING COORDINATOR, FLOORING DEPOT OF PANAMA CITY

We spend a lot of time in our home. Our home is a space for sleeping, working, eating, entertaining, and recharging. Feeling comfortable in your home is critical for your emotional well-being, and your home's flooring sets the tone and atmosphere of your living space.

Think of your dream home and how you want to feel when you walk through the door. Do you want your home to feel cozy and comfortable? Luxe and modern? Serene and peaceful? You may even want each room to have a different ambiance than the other.

Many times, we base our interior design choices on current trends, but by understanding the way your flooring impacts the mood of your room, you can make informed decisions that enhance the harmony and

create lasting comfort in your space.



Warm and Cozy with Carpet

Carpet is known for its warmth and comfort, making it a popular choice for bedrooms and living rooms. Soft, plush carpeting can create a cozy and inviting atmosphere, perfect for relaxation and comfort.

Carpet's softness underfoot isn't the only reason it's an inviting choice. During the cold-

er seasons, carpet can make your room a comfortable place to be as it acts as a natural insulator, providing physical warmth. Carpet also absorbs sound, creating a quieter environment for you to relax in.

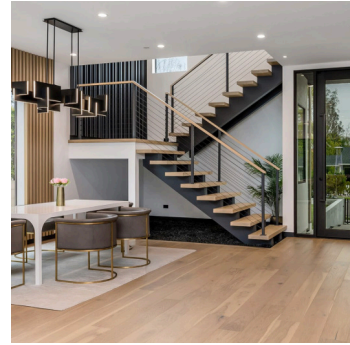


Cool Elegance with Hardwood

Hardwood floors exude a timeless elegance and sophistication and are often found in formal areas of the home.

Hardwood can make a room feel refined and inviting, as well as provide a classic backdrop for varying interior design styles.

Hardwood also provides visual continuity, making it perfect for smaller spaces. The uninterrupted flow of wood can enhance the visual impact of an area.



Modern Versatility with Laminate and Vinyl

Laminate and vinyl offer budget-friendly and versatile flooring options for modern living spaces. Laminate and

vinyl are low-maintenance flooring options and come in a variety of styles and colors, creating versatility for all types of style.

Laminate and vinyl are durable, low-maintenance, and easy to clean flooring options, helping to create a low-stress environment.



Serenity with Natural Stone and Tile

Easy to clean and cool to the touch, it's no wonder why tile is a popular choice in Florida. It's also the perfect option for those trying to make their home feel

FLOORING
continued on page 19

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Wellness

New Year, New You, Better Us: The Role of Self-Care in a Healthy Marriage



BY JAMIE C. WILLIAMSON, PHD

Choosing self-care is not selfish, it's necessary for the health of your marriage and every close relationship in your life. If you constantly ignore your own needs, you risk becoming emotionally overwhelmed and short-tempered. The unfortunate reality is that those you care about most often bear the brunt of your exhaustion and frustration.

Why Self-Care Matters in Marriage

Self-care supports personal wellness by helping you maintain emotional balance and daily resilience. This strong emotional foundation enables you to handle daily stressors and engage more meaningfully in relationships without feeling flooded or drained.

Presence matters more than performance. Being steady and grounded, rather than distracted by endless tasks, is key to healthy, close connections. The purest message of love isn't found in the dozens of things you do for your spouse (and family, coworkers, and friends), but in the other messages your behavior sends. Being present and fully involved in the moment makes those you love feel seen, heard, valued, and loved.

Shifting Your Mindset

Shifting your mindset around self-care can be transformative for both you and your marriage. When you habitually put your partner's needs ahead of your own, it can slowly erode your sense of self and satisfaction within the relationship.

When you learn to see self-care as an act of love—both for yourself and your spouse—you begin to nurture the relationship in deeper, more sustainable ways. Making intentional time for rest, reflection, and ac-

tivities that replenish your personal wellness isn't self-indulgent; it's an investment in your capacity to be present and attentive with your partner. And this, in turn, builds a healthier marriage.

Small Self-Care Changes Build Happier Marriages

Understanding the value of self-care requires distinguishing between good health – not being ill – and “wellness” which is the capacity to function optimally in all aspects of your life.

To reach a state of “high level wellness” you need to practice self-care in several interconnected categories, including: Physical, Emotional, Intellectual, Social, Spiritual, Practical, and Environmental. And you need to balance your efforts among the categories, so that one category does not interfere with self-care in another category. This, obviously, takes a lot of planning time, intention, and habit-changing routines.

But, thankfully, adopting just a few simple self-care practices makes a big difference in your ability to avoid burnout, defensiveness, and the tendency to be critical or easily triggered – all obstacles to loving fully and well.

To start building a new you, and a renewed relationship:

Be kind to yourself: Take care of your physical self through exercise and eating well. Take care of your emotional self by allowing time to rest, relax, and refuel. Acknowledge your efforts and achievements and give yourself grace when things don't go as planned.

Set goals: Working toward a personal goal enhances your self-esteem and gives you a sense of purpose. Whether it's learning a new skill, achieving a fitness milestone, taking a class, or changing careers, give your own dreams the time and effort they deserve.

Practice gratitude: Reflecting on the positive aspects of



your life, your marriage, and your spouse improves your daily mood and ability to be optimistic and resilient.

Practice mindfulness:

Reduce stress through exercise or peaceful activities so you can be more mindful in your daily interactions, more intentional about your connections, and better equipped to process emotional moments.

Strengthen relationships and social connections:

Healthy social connections are integral to personal wellness. Invest quality time with your spouse, family and friends who invigorate you. Avoid people who de-energize you. Set boundaries that allow you to feel respected, safe, and fulfilled.

Do what brings you joy:

Express yourself through hobbies, interests, or creative outlets. Be sure to seek balance. Do things for others but remember to make time for activities that YOU enjoy.

These small changes in your self-care practices will make a noticeable difference in your general outlook and ability to handle challenges with patience and compassion. You will have the emotional capacity to respond constructively, deepen your marital connection, and contribute to

your resilience as a couple.

By making self-care and personal wellness a priority, you build a happier marriage.

Let me know how I can help.

Jamie C. Williamson, PhD is a FL Supreme Court Certified Family Mediator and Member of the Gottman Referral Network, with a Certificate in the Science of Wellbeing and Happiness from the Harvard

School of Medicine. She is an owner and partner at Amity Mediation Workshop, a mediation practice specializing in “friendly divorce” mediation and psycho-educational couples counseling. Dr. Jamie speaks frequently on relationship topics and authors the blog “Work it Out.” You can find her online at amitymediationworkshop.com.

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Design and Culture: Baby, It's Cold Outside

There is nothing like a warm fire this time of year to warm our homes. If you are building a home with a fireplace or have a fireplace that you would like to update, We have some local resources to assist you with your project and some information on what's available out there for a fireplace surround. If you are looking for someone to handle the whole project, Linda Mugglin, the owner of Tassels Interiors, has worked in Bay County for over 30 years from new construction to remodeling. Tassels Interiors has all the resources you need locally to either design or reface a fireplace and they can manage the project to get everything that you need from start to finish whether you choose masonry or tile. They also work with local carpenters for any woodwork if you are thinking about a wood mantel or shiplap.



a wide range of options as most counter-top fabricators do fireplace surrounds as well. Quartzite, Marble, Soapstone, Granite and Dolomites can all be used for this application.

Another option for this look, which is a more recent technology, is porcelain slabs and it is available in some beautiful options that emulate natural materials such as Calacatta

marble. This is a wonderful advantage as the cost of Italian Marble, due to its exotic characteristics, is very high.



If you are under new construction, whether you use natural stone or porcelain, it is a good idea to connect with a local fabricator or a designer during the beginning stages as these slabs vary in size. They can guide you through this process to be sure you get the end product you imagine.

Granite Plus is a local fabricator with a showroom located at 17801 Ashley Dr. If you are interested in porcelain or natural stone for your fireplace come by and see us. We have a wide range of porcelain and natural stone options for your new fireplace surround.

When selecting a surround there is lots to consider such as if you are considering shiplap, you will still need some type of fireproof material around the firebox. Natural Stone is a wonderful option for a fireplace surround and depending on the aesthetic of your fireplace and the style you are looking for will depend on your selection.

If you would like something seamless and modern, stone or porcelain slabs will achieve this look. You can visit a local counter-top fabricator for



FLOORING

continued from page 17

like a peaceful escape from life's craziness.

Natural stone and tile evoke a sense of serenity and connection to the natural world. Often used in bathrooms and kitchens, stone and tile can create a clean and serene atmosphere.



The Power of Color

The color of your flooring is another factor that contributes to the ambiance of your home. Light colors tend to make a room feel spacious, clean and airy while dark colors create a warm and cozy feel.

Cool tone colors create a sense of calmness and tranquility and are the perfect option for bedrooms, bathrooms, and any other areas of your home where relaxation is desired. Warm tone colors are cozy and inviting, perfect for living rooms and other shared spaces where you would like to create a sense of "home."

The psychology of flooring is a fascinating aspect of interior design that goes beyond aesthetics and functionality. Your choice of flooring can deep-

ly impact the atmosphere, mood, and overall well-being of your home.

If you would like help curating your home's ambiance, Flooring Depot of Panama City is here to help! It's the perfect time to shop as we are running our Home for the Holidays Sale from now until the end of the year, with great deals on flooring, cabinets, countertops, and more! Stop by our main store at the corner of 15th Street and Lisenby. Call us at (850) 785-2216 or visit our website at flooringdepotofpanama.com.

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Lifestyle

How Much Should You Budget for Window Treatments?

BY DONNA GODWIN, OWNER OF MADE IN THE SHADE

Understanding the Rule of Thumb Based on Home Value**

When purchasing a new home—or refreshing the one you already love—window treatments often come later in the planning process. Yet they play a major role in privacy, comfort, light control, energy savings, and the overall style of your home. Because the prices of blinds, shades, shutters, and drapery can vary so widely, I’m often asked “How much should I expect to spend?”

Designers and industry professionals often rely on a helpful guideline: budgeting a percentage of the home’s purchase price toward window treatments. While not a strict rule, it provides clarity and realistic expectations when planning whole-home projects.

The General Guideline: 1–6% of Home Value

Most experts agree that homeowners typically fall within 1% to 6% of the home’s purchase price, depending on the level of customization and quality they choose.



1–2% of Home Value — Essential, Budget-Friendly Options

This range is ideal for homeowners looking for simple, functional, and cost-efficient solutions. Faux wood blinds, basic roller shades, or standard cellular shades often fall into this category. These products still provide privacy and light control but stay within a conser-

vative budget. For a \$300,000 home, this translates to approximately \$3,000–\$6,000 in total window-covering expenses.

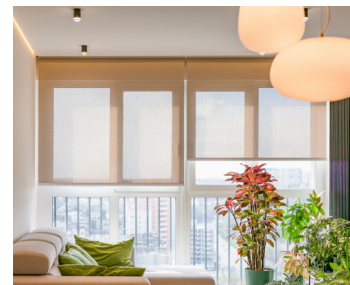
2–4% of Home Value — Mid-Range, Custom Looks

Many homeowners fall comfortably into this middle range. This budget allows room for custom fit, higher-quality materials, soft treatments like drapery, and specialty options such as top-down bottom-up cellular shades or layered treatments. If you’re aiming for a balance between performance and aesthetics, this range gives you flexibility without jumping into luxury pricing. On a \$300,000 home, expect \$6,000–\$12,000.



4–6% of Home Value — High-End, Designer, or Motorized Solutions

If your vision includes motorized shades, plantation shutters, designer drapery, or premium natural materials, you’ll likely land in this category. These treatments elevate both the beauty and functionality of each space. Homes with large window expanses, specialty shapes, or high ceilings also tend to fall into this tier simply due to scale. On a \$300,000 home, this range equates to \$12,000–\$18,000.



Why Budgeting Matters

Window treatments are unique because they enhance both the daily function of your

home and its design style. They influence temperature control, energy efficiency, sleep quality, and even home value. Establishing a budget helps homeowners choose the right mix of treatments—prioritizing privacy in bedrooms, light control in living areas, and energy savings where the sun is strongest.

Final Thoughts

The percentage-based budgeting rule isn’t meant to limit you—it’s designed to guide you through the planning process with confidence. Whether you’re aiming for simple and functional or high-end and automated, window treatments are one of the most worthwhile investments you can make in a home. With a realistic budget in place, you can create beautiful, comfortable, and long-lasting spaces tailored to your lifestyle. Please trust Made in the Shade to help guide you in the design process to fit your style and budget.




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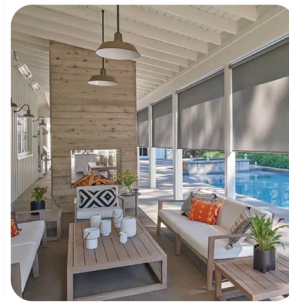
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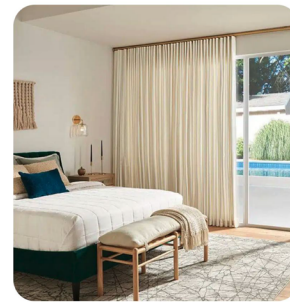
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Sean of the South: It Was Late



BY SEAN DIETRICH

It was late. I pulled into the campus after seven o'clock to attend my last class of the semester. My last college class. Ever. It was a night class.

In America, most self-respecting people my age were finishing supper, settling down to watch "Wheel of Fortune." But I was in school.

I had been attending community college for 11 years. I had been taking a lot of night courses. Which meant that I had perfected the art of eating supper in my truck, on the way to class. I drove with my knees, ate with my hands, and controlled the radio with my big toe.

Supper often consisted of foil-wrapped tamales, purchased from Carmela, a middle-aged Mexican woman who visited our construction jobsites. Carmela traveled in a battered '84 Nissan Maxima that looked like a roving salvage yard.

Every time I'd buy a tamale, Carmela would pat my cheek and say, "Joo are very sweet boy, but joo need a bath, joo smell like goat butt."

So parked my truck. I rushed into class, smelling like the fundamentals of a horned barnyard animal.

Eleven years it had taken me to finish school. Me. A middle-school dropout. My formal education ended in seventh grade, after my father took his own life with a hunting rifle. I simply quit going to school. I was a rural child. It wasn't a big deal. Nobody seemed to care what rural dropouts did.

I got my first job hanging drywall at age 14. I started working in bars, playing music shortly thereafter. I had a lot of jobs. I hung gutter. I worked as an ice-cream-scoop. I was a telemarketer. I was a nobody. I was white trash.

Until I enrolled in community college.

I enrolled as an adult, and my life changed. I became alumni at Okaloosa-Walton Community College.

I completed high-school equivalency courses. I finished the collegiate coursework. It took me eleven years. I worked hard. And I count every year I spent at OWCC as a blessing.

I don't care what you've heard, community college is the beating heart of America. Your big, fancy schools are well and good. But show me a community college, and I'll show you the vascular system of this nation.

America is not built on the shoulders of Harvard or Yale graduates. America's internal

organs are made up of men and women who know the difference between good and bad tamales.

That night, our classroom consisted of a commercial plumber, an electrician's assistant, a few GIs, and a Hooters waitress who looked as though she had come directly from work. And me, a degenerate bar musician/tile-layer.

Our literature teacher arrived. Soon, we were discussing what was known to our class as "TKAM." "To Kill a Mockingbird." And everyone in our classroom had something to say about TKAM.

Namely, because this book

was not just literature to us. It was a taste of home. The book took place in Monroe County, Alabama. We were one-point-five counties away from Monroe County.

We all talked about deeper meanings within the book. We spoke of metaphors and hyperboles and allegories and a bunch of other five-dollar words nobody understood except the Hooters waitress. And it was a great night.

And when class was finished, our teacher got this tear-stained look in her eyes and said, "I'm going to miss you all."

She said, "A few of you are going to graduate this year, and

I wanted to do something special for you to mark this occasion."

She invited the graduates to the front of the room. We all shyly walked forward. She gave us tiny potted begonias and greeting cards. She kissed our foreheads.

They don't kiss your foreheads at Yale.

The Hooters waitress and I stood shoulder to shoulder. The teacher made a big deal about how we were all such important people. She told the Hooters waitress that she was going to be a big-time nurse someday. The waitress blushed.

Then the professor told the classroom that she believed I would become a writer one day. I wanted to bury my face from embarrassment.

But the old woman touched my cheek and said, "You are so beautiful, Sean. I know God is going to use your past to make a marvelous future." Then she kissed my forehead again.

If there was a dry eye in the classroom it belonged to a needle.

And anyway, this goat butt will forever be a proud community college graduate.

Publisher's Note: When this story takes place, Northwest Florida State College was known as Okaloosa-Walton Community College (OWCC). While the name has changed, the mission—and the life-changing impact of NWFSC—remains the same.



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Deb Robertson is a local real estate agent who knows the St. George Island market and takes a hands-on approach with her clients. She helps buyers and sellers understand the details that matter, from rental potential to HOA considerations, and often works with out-of-area clients. Deb is active in the community and focused on making every transaction a positive experience.



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