HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

MASTER GARDENER PROGRAM

Do you like gardening and want to learn more about it? Are you looking to participate in a University of Florida training program? Would you like to share your knowledge with others and meet new people with similar interests? If you said yes to these questions, then the Osceola County Master Gardener program may be for you.

Gardening in Central Florida is like nowhere else. It can be a very frustrating task for a veteran gardener who learned gardening from somewhere else. Understanding our growing seasons and knowing what plants grow here can be very difficult. The Osceola County Master Gardener program is designed to help with these tribulations and train individuals interested in gardening the proper horticultural practices for Florida. The program is supported by IFAS (Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences) at the University of Florida.

Extension agents and specialists from IFAS provide the training for the Master Gardener volunteers. Master Gardeners receive over 60 hours of training during a 3-month period. Classes are held on a variety of gardening topics, including citrus, pest management, and lawn care. Through field trips, demonstrations, and activities, class participants learn about soils, insects, plant diseases, weeds, efficient irrigation, attracting wildlife, natural ecosystems and native plants.

After the training program and completing a comprehensive exam, the volunteers are certified as Master Gardeners for a year. They agree to provide at least 50 hours of service to the county by helping local citizens reduce their impact on the environment while having attractive and functional landscapes. The Osceola County Master Gardeners serve as volunteers for the Osceola County Extension Service. Many volunteers have renewed their contracts and continue to be active beyond their original commitment.

Eleanor Foerste, currently the Natural Resources Agent, established the Osceola County Master Gardeners program in 1981. Since then more than 250 Osceola County Master Gardeners have been certified providing over 63,000 hours of service to more than 45,000 local residents. A few of the Master Gardeners from the original class are still active, providing the county with over 20 years of volunteer work each. Master Gardener volunteers have been involved in a variety of activities helping youth and adults learn about horticulture in our county. They also put a lot of work into creating our two demonstration gardens, landscape and vegetable gardens, located in the Osceola Heritage Park complex. These gardens show county residents actual gardening techniques that can be used at home. In addition, Master Gardeners can be found at the Osceola County Extension Office to help answer plant care questions from county residents periodically throughout the week.

Classes for the new crop of Master Gardeners will begin September 16th and continue once a week (every Tuesday) until mid-December. Class time is from 9am to 4pm. The program covers information on soils, fertilizers, weeds and insects. Find out about growing fruits and vegetables for our Central Florida climate. Trees and shrubs need water and sunlight. Learn which ones are most adapted to your yard. When pests become a problem indoors or outside, use least toxic pest control methods to manage the problem. Master Gardeners will learn what works and why so they can have the least impact on water quality and avoid pollution. Cost for the program is $90, which covers the cost of books, materials, and field trips.

To be a Master Gardener, please contact our office by August 1st and ask for a "Master Gardener Sprouting Kit". Space is limited, so don't delay.

If you have a plant question, contact our current Master Gardeners. They are available to take your calls on Mondays to Fridays from 10am to 2pm. Call (321) 697-3000 or check our Web site at http://osceola.ifas.
ufl.edu for plant information.

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