HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

FARM CITY DAYS

What do cattle, citrus, chickens and camellias have in common? Yes, they all begin with a "C." They are also agricultural products grown in Osceola County.

Only a small percentage of our population is directly involved in the production of agricultural commodities. But if you eat or have a lawn or garden, you are involved in agriculture.

Agriculture is an important part of our local economy. According to the 2002 U.S. Census of Agriculture, more than 500 farms sold nearly $90 million in agricultural products in Osceola County. Nearly half of the farmers reported additional occupations, indicating that some farm part time. Value-added products and services - such as packaging, marketing, shipping, lawn and landscape care and golf courses - are other agriculture-related businesses that contribute to the economy.

One factor in the county's strong agricultural history is the canals connecting our chain of lakes. Hamilton Disston's crews dug them before the turn of the last century. The canals helped drain the land, allowing more agricultural production.

Historically, Osceola County was a major producer of both beef and dairy cattle. Many of our prominent families are descendents of ranchers who came here to graze cattle on the natural grasslands. Before fence laws, cattle wandered freely and were sometimes seen in downtown streets.

Today, Osceola County leads the state in head of beef cattle produced. Brahman cattle, the ones with the humped backs, can still be seen grazing in pastures near highways.

Citrus groves once stretched from U.S. Highway 27 to Melbourne, but serious freezes and urban growth have shifted our land uses. Osceola still has about 15,000 acres in citrus production. Many homeowners have citrus in their yards that were part of old groves, subdivided for development. Tropical fish, aquarium plants, bees, honey, mulch, lumber, plastic plant containers, produce, sod production and landscape horticulture are other aspects of agriculture that are produced in Osceola County, hence contribute to the local economy.

50 years of Farm-City Days

Residents can learn more about local agriculture and agribusinesses by attending the Osceola County Farm-City Days next weekend. This year celebrates 50 years of Farm-City Days festivals. Similar events have been helping farm families and urban residents connect and create better understanding and appreciation within the community nationwide.

Local businesses have partnered with the University of Florida's Osceola County Extension office to help you and your family experience agriculture firsthand. Activities in Osceola Heritage Park on East U.S. Highway 192 are available for you to help us celebrate Farm-City Days.

A farm tour is scheduled from 1:30 until 4:30 p.m. Friday. Take a coach tour through agricultural areas and learn about agriculture from local experts. Tours are free, but require preregistration. After the tour, enjoy an authentic, home-cooked steak dinner Friday evening. Tickets are available for $10 each.

A free Family Fun Day is planned for 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday with games such as cow milking and orange-juice squeezing. Educational exhibits and demonstrations will be open. For more information on Farm City Days, call 321-697-3000.