HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

FARM CITY DAYS

If you eat or have a lawn or garden, then you are involved in agriculture. With much of the attention on the tourism industry and development in Osceola County, many of us forget about the other very important part of our economy and history in this county - agriculture.

Only a small percentage of our population is directly involved in the production of agricultural commodities, however agriculture is still a very 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, including cattle, sod, citrus and plant nursery production. 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, the average Florida farm being 232 acres, Osceola County has 485 ranches and farms with an average size of 1,259 acres. 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.

Rapid population increase, urban growth, increased land values and effects of estate taxes are forcing farms to subdivide, affecting profitability and management decisions. In order to continue to be profitable, farmers and ranchers are being forced to diversify and manage resources more efficiently. Using technologies such as improved genetics and biotechnologies, they can produce commodities which are more nutritious, stay fresh longer and are not damaged by microbes and insects, reducing the need for pesticides and reducing waste and spoilage.

Whenever possible, buy locally grown or domestic produce and goods to support our local economy. The challenges the agricultural community faces affect us all, so it is important that we work together to achieve the common goal of providing food, fiber and shelter for our families and the world. Contact the extension offices for information about Florida-grown products and their availability.

Nearly sixty years ago, Kiwanis International and American Farm Bureau formed a coordinating council with the goal of bringing about a better understanding between rural and urban people by increasing their knowledge and appreciation of each other as partners in progress. Farm-City Week is a result of these efforts. This upcoming weekend, October 28th and 29th, we will begin to celebrate Farm-City Days.

Representatives from a variety of agricultural and community businesses and organizations in Osceola County are making plans for the sixth annual Farm City Days. Activities to help youth and adults become more familiar with agriculture and issues of interest to rural and urban residents are planned.

In conjunction with the Great Outdoor Days, a free Family Farm Fun Day is planned for October 28th and 29th from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Games such as cow milking and orange-juice squeezing, crafts, educational exhibits and demonstrations will be open for your enjoyment. Gator wrestling and worm farming will be highlights of the day - a must see. The Osceola County Master Gardeners will also be holding their annual Fall Plant Sale during these times. A great time to spend with the family, learn about local agriculture, and take home some new plants for
your landscape. Free farm tours and a steak fundraising dinner will be held in November. For more information on Farm City Days, call 321-697-3000.

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Date: October 8th, 2006