HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

MASTER GARDENER PROGRAM

This year, 2006, marks the 25th Anniversary of the Osceola County Master Gardener volunteer program. In fact, earlier this year, the Osceola County Board of County Commissioners proclaimed 2006 as the "Year of the Osceola County Master Gardeners". Now it is your chance to become a part of this county volunteer tradition.

If you have ever had a problem in your garden or landscape that you couldn't solve, you like gardening and want to learn more about it, are looking to participate in a University of Florida training program, and would like to share your knowledge with others and meet new people with similar interests, then the Osceola County Master Gardener program may be for you.

The rapid urban growth in many areas of the United States coupled with increased interest in the environment and home gardening have prompted ever-increasing numbers of homeowner questions to County Extension Service agents. Many of these questions are seasonal in nature and are relatively easily answered assuming that one has horticultural training.

Eleanor Foerste, currently the Natural Resources Agent, established the Osceola County Master Gardener program in 1981. Since then nearly 300 Osceola County Master Gardeners have been certified providing over 78,000 hours of service to more than 65,000 local residents. A few of the Master Gardeners from the original class are still active, providing the county with 25 years of volunteer work.

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 county residents every weekday.

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.

Extension agents and specialists from UF/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, completing a comprehensive exam, and a number of "in-training" hours the volunteers are certified as Master Gardeners for one year. They have to agree to provide at least 50 hours of service each year 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 University of Florida/IFAS Osceola County Extension Service. Many volunteers have renewed their contracts and continue to be active beyond their original commitment.

Classes for the new crop of Master Gardeners will begin September 19th and continue once a week (every Tuesday) until mid-December. Class time is from 9am to 4pm. Cost for the program is $150, which covers the cost of books, materials, and field trips. If the horticulture training sounds interesting, but you cannot commit to the volunteer work, we are also offering a similar program called the "Osceola County Great Gardeners", which is a shorter educational program that does not involve a volunteer commitment.

For a Master Gardener or Great Gardener application, please contact our office by August 25th. The class sizes
are limited, so don’t delay. For answers to gardening questions, contact the Osceola County Master Gardeners at (321) 697-3000. They are available to take your calls Monday thru Friday from 10am to 2pm.

Jennifer Welshans
Horticulture Agent
Osceola County Extension Service
1921 Kissimmee Valley Lane
Kissimmee, FL 34744
321-697-3000
jwel2@osceola.org
osceola.ifas.ufl.edu
Date: August 13, 2006