Trees make a world of difference and with Arbor Day just around the corner, it's time to celebrate trees and the great qualities that they provide to us. Arbor Day is celebrated nationally in April, but in Florida, we celebrate it the third Friday in January.

Arbor Day was created to encourage tree planting and tree care. J. Sterling Morton of Nebraska founded Arbor Day in 1872. It was created in order to urge settlers in the prairies to plant trees, which would provide them with shade, shelter, fruit, fuel, and beautification of their land.

The treeless plains of Nebraska disturbed the Michigan native, J. Sterling Morton. He knew the value of trees and saw the need for them in his new state. Being a journalist and editor of Nebraska's first newspaper, he spread agricultural information and his passion for trees to an equally enthusiastic audience. His fellow settlers also soon realized they missed their trees. But, more importantly, they understood that trees were needed as windbreaks to keep soil in place, for fuel and building materials, and for shade from the hot sun.

With the help of school children, over one million trees were planted on that first Arbor Day. Promoted in the newspaper, the idea of Arbor Day spread to neighboring states and eventually throughout the nation and the world. In response to the success of Arbor Day, J. Sterling Morton declared, "Other holidays repose on the past, but Arbor Day proposes for the future."

Florida selected January to commemorate Arbor Day because it is such a great time for planting trees. While our neighbors to the north have no choice but to wait until they thaw out before planting trees in April, Floridians can enjoy these cool temperatures to work in the landscape.

Those of us who's blood has thinned since moving south, may say that January is too cold to be working outside, however, this month is ideal for planting trees and shrubs, because the weather conditions are great for plant establishment.

Cold-hardy landscape plants produce little top growth during cold months. However, root growth continues throughout the winter. Plants installed in landscapes now will begin to establish a good root system before top growth starts in late February or March.

Trees are wonderful plants. Here are just a few of the benefits they provide us:

- Shade to cool ourselves and our homes
- Habitat for wildlife, like birds and squirrels
- Joy for children, for climbing in and building tree houses
- Beautification of our communities and countryside
- A source for fruit, nuts, lumber, paper, etc.

Trees are also very important in our environmental conservation measures. They help to conserve energy, reduce soil erosion, clean and replenish the air we breathe, and help protect our rivers and streams. As you can see, trees are very important to our everyday lives. We need to care for trees and replenish ones that decline or are destroyed.

The University of Florida/IFAS Osceola County Extension Service is doing their part in celebrating Arbor Day. With funding by the U.S. Forest Service, Urban and Community Forestry Grant and the Florida Division of Forestry, we will celebrate Florida Arbor Day with an educational and tree giveaway program, entitled ReLeaf Osceola. Osceola County residents attending the program will receive a voucher for a free tree to be picked up at participating nurseries.

Programs will be held now through the summer. The next class will be held Tuesday, January 23rd at 7pm. It will
be located in the Extension Services building at Osceola Heritage Park. Please call (321) 697-3015 to register and for additional class dates.

For answers to other gardening questions, please call the Osceola County Extension at (321) 697-3000. They are available to take your calls, Monday to Friday from 10am to 2pm.

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