HORTICULTURE COLUMN

TRAILS

What great weather! Perfect for hiking, biking, walking, skating, horseback riding and doing anything outside. Almost any time of day, you will find heavy activity at the local trails along the lakefronts in Kissimmee and St. Cloud. Some residents enjoy walking in the peaceful atmosphere of woodlands such as at The Disney Wilderness Preserve or the School District’s Environmental Study Center.

Trails provide great opportunities for families and friends to exercise, meet neighbors and newcomers and observe wildlife. Some trails are important transportation alternatives allowing residents to walk or bike to work, school, shopping or parks.

Greenways and trails are corridors that connect communities and natural areas, linking parks, schools, towns and ecosystems. They help protect the character of the community while preserving our natural, cultural and historic resources.

Federal, state and local governments partner with private land owners to create a network of greenways and trails joining public and private lands. Some greenways are designed to preserve natural habitats for plants and animals. They provide opportunities for nature study or peaceful areas for personal enjoyment.

Trails can be in open space, natural areas or in cities. Sometimes trails are established on old abandoned railroad corridors. Rail trails and utility easements provide long, linear trails.

Historic trails trace paths of early explorers such as Hernando DeSoto, Juan Ponce DeLeon or William Bartram.

Trails can be paved and designed for multiple user groups, such as the West Orange Trail. Walkers, cyclists, skaters, joggers and families with strollers are often seen sharing the trail.

Rural trails often follow old jeep paths and accommodate mountain bikers, hikers and horseback riders. There is little cost to develop these trails but trailheads with parking and restroom facilities are desirable features.

Single-track trails are nothing more than a designated path, possibly with blaze markings along the way so you know you are still on the trail. These low cost trails can be created by bushwhacking through the woods or by following existing wildlife trails or fire lanes.

Costs vary depending on the type of trail development required and amenities such as educational signs, displays, restrooms, water fountains, parking, etc.

Personal preferences vary. Some users prefer a feeling of solitude where there is little likelihood of seeing others. These trails are ideal for quiet wildlife observation and peaceful meditation. Multi-use trails invite people to meet and greet since there are many users along the way. A mixture of trail types is desirable to avoid conflicting preferences.

Trails through urban areas revitalize down towns and spur economic development. Businesses such as restaurants and snack bars, bed and breakfast lodgings, skate and bike rental and repair shops begin to locate near the trails. Research has shown that real estate values increase since residents value greenways and trails as community amenities for recreation and environmental preservation.

Developers who are incorporating greenways into their land are finding quick sales and higher prices. Developments are eligible for special recognition that helps in a competitive market. Greenways and trails also help meet conservation and recreation requirements for permitting and the comprehensive plan process.
Private land owners involved in ranching, groves and forestry have preserved a tapestry of natural communities supporting a diversity of wildlife in a variety of habitats. Without them, we would not have a strong economy or the open space and unique natural character that makes Florida a special place.

Private landowners have worked with the Florida Trail Association for years to allow members access to their land. Members have developed trust with the land owners by demonstrating that trail users are responsible citizens and don’t litter, vandalize or poach cattle or game animals.

Conservation easements on private lands provide the owner with cash flow and/or relief from estate tax and other property taxes. The easements allow the landowner to continue to own, use and manage the land while protecting the land for their heirs.

Conservation easements on private lands do not have to be open to the public. However, private landowners and developers are often relieved to find out about Florida Statute 260.0125 which specifically protects them from liability claims when their land is designated as part of the statewide system of greenways and trails.

Florida’s Office of Greenways and Trails provides support for private landowners, communities and developers interested in greenways and trails. Call toll free 1-877-822-5208. Gainesville, Orange County, Pinellas County and the Florida Keys are a few places with successful trails.

Thursday night, the Osceola County Greenways and Trails planning team kicked off a series of public workshops to help determine long range plans for additional trails in our county.

Want to know more? The public is invited to attend one of the upcoming meetings to make suggestions for types of trails and preferred locations. While funds are not currently available, your input is important for the long range planning process and future funding efforts. Stop by to learn more about greenways and trails. You can see where others might be interested in trails and draw your suggestions on county maps.

The next workshop is at the BVL library on Monday and at the St. Cloud Civic Center on Wednesday. Come anytime between 4 and 8 p.m. as is it set up in an open house format with several stations.

Pick up a schedule for the remaining six workshops at the information booth under the tent at Aquamania this weekend. Aquamania is a festival celebrating our lakes at the Kissimmee Lakefront Park by the boat ramp. There are a variety of fun activities, free music and entertainment, cardboard raft races and educational displays.

If you cannot attend Aquamania, call the Osceola County Extension Office for a copy of the schedule or pick one up at local libraries. The schedule is also available online at the Greenways and Trails web page at http://osceola.ifas.ufl.edu/nat/natrec.htm.

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