

HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

AN OSCEOLA COUNTY WELCOME

Over the past few years, more than 1000 new residents moved into Florida each day. If you are one of our newcomers, I invite you to join me and learn more about the natural side of your new home. In the process, you can meet others and find out more about our community and the many great things we have to offer.

Whether strolling on an interpretive Woods Walk, taking the UF/IFAS Florida Master Naturalist Class for certification, or visiting one of our natural attractions with family and friends, I want you to see parts of our county in a new way and enjoy the wonders of the wild as you explore our natural areas.

When I ask residents where they are from, the reply is normally the place of their birth, either up home, back home or down home. Rarely, will you find anyone who will answer "Kissimmee," "St. Cloud," "BVL," or even "Poinciana". The reality is our population is changing very fast and local born residents are outnumbered by transplants. Newcomers have not developed a sense of permanence here, what we refer to as a sense of place.

It is possible to be from somewhere else, born in another place, and still "love the one you're with" where you feel at home in your new place. That is my goal for anyone who has decided to move to Osceola County.

Make this your new home. Get to know us, like us, love us and stay a while. I welcome you and invite you to become a part of the fabric of our community by greeting your neighbors, meeting your children's friends' parents, finding others with similar interests, getting involved in local civic clubs, finding a house of worship, helping improve our community.

Our UF/IFAS Extension office will share some southern hospitality and help you find information to help you with solutions for your life. We offer many free workshops and classes on a variety of topics from health to home management to horticulture and we have many volunteer opportunities to help you meet others. We can help direct you to other community services and activities, too. Once you get involved, you will have a new feeling of home, of where you are from.

I want to help you understand some of the things that make our community unique. Our woods, waters and wildlife are special and different from many other places in the world. Through classes, tours, emails or phone conversations, I want to visit with you and help answer your questions, calm your fears and feed your curiosity. From annoying ants to graceful zebra longwing butterflies, there is a lot to learn.

If you have never been for a walk in the woods before, or are not familiar with our Florida outdoors, join me for an interpretive Woods Walk. They are absolutely free! The walks each cover approximately two miles and usually take about two to three hours to complete, depending on the group. Remember to wear good walking shoes, dress for the weather and bring plenty of water. Bring a snack of nuts, crackers or fruit to nibble on along the way.

For more information on dates, times and meeting locations, and to register for any of the walks, please contact Cynthia Rutherford at our UF/IFAS Osceola County Extension office at 321-697-3000 or [email her](mailto:crut@osceola.org) at crut@osceola.org.

We are offering the Freshwater Wetlands component of the Florida Master Naturalist Program (FMNP) beginning February 8 and continuing for 6 sessions, through March 8, 2006. Certified instructors Captain Ray Robida and Ken Brooker will assist me with the course.

This 40 hour certification program is for anyone who wants in depth information about Florida's natural world and environmental history. Field trips and activities cover general ecology, habitats, vegetation types, wildlife, and conservation issues of Freshwater Wetlands in Florida, which include marshes, swamps, and permanent wetlands (lakes, rivers, and streams).

Cost per course is \$200 to cover cost of tours and reference materials. The FMNP does not provide university

credit toward a degree-seeking program, but teachers may receive credit for continuing education hours with approval of school administration.

For more information call Cindy Rutherford at 321-697-3000 or register online at [here](#) and click on the "Registration" link. Information on the other courses and offerings in other counties are also available so check for new course offerings on a regular basis.

Take advantage of some of these opportunities and feel more at home here.

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