

HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

FISH PONDS

Fishing is great fun for the entire family. Osceola County is home to numerous natural lakes that produce lunker bass and stringers of pan fish such as blue gills and red ear sunfish. Boats make access to fishing spots easier, but there are also public fishing docks available at the lakefront parks in Kissimmee and St. Cloud.

Residents often raise fish in their backyards in manmade ponds. Landowners with large lots, usually 5 acres or more, often dig a pond for fill soil. These ponds can produce good size fish if managed properly for good water quality. Large ponds on private lands may be a source of extra income when used as a fishing lease or as a fee fishing pond.

Pond construction is important. The pond location should minimize nutrient runoff from pastures, septic tanks or lawns since fertilizer encourages pond weeds to grow as well as the grass. Drainage swales around the pond collect and filter nutrients and debris before it enters the pond. It is good practice to eliminate fertilizer in a buffer around the pond to reduce the possibility of undesired nutrient runoff.

Ponds with steep sides reduce problems with invasive shoreline vegetation, however, a shallow shelf at the edge may be considered for safety and to increase wildlife habitat. Pond sides should slope to an average depth of 6 to 8 feet to the pond center.

Most productive ponds are stocked with fish. The proper number and size to be added to the pond depends on the total area of the pond. Largemouth bass need a lot of small fish to feed on. Bream (bluegill and sunfish) make good food for the bass as well as for people so they are often stocked together.

Channel catfish are also popular in ponds but usually stocked alone in ponds smaller than one-half acre. Catfish can be stocked with bass and bream in larger ponds.

On the lakes, many folks practice catch and release or fishing for fun. Catching fish for food is considered harvesting since the fish are removed from the lake or pond. I seem to spend a lot more time "fishing" than catching.

Just as the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission manages our natural lakes for fishing, management is important in a pond at home. Determining when to begin to harvest depends on the species and size of the fish. Over harvesting will reduce the population of fish that can reproduce to maintain the quantity of fish over a long period of time.

Sometimes aeration is needed to keep adequate oxygen in the pond. Fountains, sprayers or bubblers move air through the water to support fish as well as plant growth.

Some plants in ponds are desirable because they produce oxygen as they grow. Too many plants can be a problem. Learn which ones are beneficial and which ones grow too vigorously. It is better to prevent rampant growth than to have to use chemicals or mechanical harvesters.

The University of Florida has a number of publications to help pond owners with management decisions. Contact the Osceola County Extension office for more information at 321-697-3000 or go to the web site at <http://osceola.ifas.ufl.edu>. Publications are available online through the EDIS link by typing in key words such as "fish ponds".

If you don't have a pond to fish in, come throw in a line at the Great Outdoor Fest, Nov. 11-13 at Osceola Heritage Park. Saturday, noon to 6 pm and Sunday, noon to 5 pm, participants can fish in our pond for catfish or bream. Cane poles and bait will be provided.

Dr. Chuck Cichra, Fish Ecology and Management Specialist with the UF/IFAS will have lots of information on fish and aquatic critters that are fish food. Participants can use dip nets at the edge of the pond to investigate what fish

eat.

In addition to some great entertainment, the Great Outdoor Days Fest includes the Toho Water Authority's Conservation Village with nearly 40 educational exhibits and demonstrations and an Education Station brought to you by University of Florida/IFAS Extension. Call Kissimmee Convention and Visitors Bureau for more information on other Great Outdoor Fest happenings at 407-847-5000.

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