Halloween is a season of mixed meaning. For some, it honors lost souls, while for others, it makes light of spooky, scary creatures, both real and imagined. Spiders, snakes and bats are often portrayed as evil, hurtful creatures with no other purpose but to do you in. Scenes are set in deep, dark woods with glowing eyes and snarling sounds. It is unfair to portray the woods in the dark as a horror movie waiting to happen.

Woods aren’t bad, but they can be intimidating. That is true for any situation that is unfamiliar. So, to get over the fear factor, and get real: take a trek in the woods and find out what makes it good, not ghoulish!

Natural areas provide homes for birds and wildlife; wood for lumber, paper and mulch; filtration for stormwater runoff and open space and recreation opportunities.

Osceola County has a comprehensive plan that includes keeping designated natural areas, commonly called green space or greenways (connected green space). If you visit the woods and natural areas in the daylight, you will see the diversity of plants and hear the many calls of birds, mammals and insects. As you study them, you will find out what makes the squeaky noises and they become less spooky.

A team of government staff and citizens have been working together so you know where our natural areas are and what places are accessible to the public. The Pathfinder newsletter lists many of the local nature trails. Contact the UF/IFAS Osceola County Extension Office at 321-697-3000 for a hard copy or email me at efoe@osceola.org for more information.

While some may not be readily accessible after the recent storms, local Parks staff are hard at work trying to get trails cleared. As you know, this takes time and money but it is on a list of community needs being addressed by local officials.

We are fortunate that much of our county is still active in agricultural production and native habitat. Our longtime ranch families have been stewards of the land, providing for huge expanses of diverse natural habitats on their private property. Wildlife has flourished in these areas with woodlands, pastures, groves, wetlands and lakes where there is adequate food, water and space - the basic needs of all animals.

As our towns have grown into cities, and residential and business developments have expanded, the natural areas close to town have often been converted to buildings, roads, stormwater ponds and parking lots, not the areas wild things prefer. County master plans for bicycle and pedestrian paths, as well as greenways and trails are addressing that issue and making recommendations to help us plan for future needs.

There are many who support the idea of having woods and wilderness with public access near development so families have recreational opportunities nearby. Not so they can scare the wits out of the kids in spooky woods, but to teach them the many values of these woodsy wonders.

Developers are learning to build with nature in mind and are trying some progressive techniques to integrate natural areas with growth. The bottom line in business -- profit -- is essential, so customers have to show they are willing to pay for natural amenities. Home buyers pay a premium for wooded lots or lots next to green space in developments. This translates to economic incentives for leaving natural areas intact.

As developers continue to expand our urban growth areas away from town centers, they purchase property with natural areas. These natural landscapes have value that is evaluated by planners, engineers, architects, landscape architects and environmental regulators. Realizing these values, they incorporate natural areas into parks, recreational paths and water management planning, reducing some infrastructure costs for land clearing and landscaping. Water filtration and retention are important.
benefits of leaving natural areas undeveloped.

One strategy for providing open space is to increase density in some areas of the development but leave open space for trees, natural areas and meadows. This leaves wild lands for wildlife and developed areas for people, in contrast to dense development everywhere as we see in some parts of Florida. Osceola County is developing a plan for open space, natural areas or greenways as well as recreational pathways, sometimes called linear parks, to connect communities and parks.

Saving woodlands is important environmentally, but there are costs for caring for the land. Private developers preserve park land and pass the cost to the buyers. When state, county or city government buys and cares for land, they also pass the cost on to us. The question is, are we willing to pay? Do we need more good woods or are the natural area nearby just spooky spaces destined for development. You decide.

Eleanor Foerste
Natural Resources Agent
Osceola County Extension/University of Florida
1921 Kissimmee Valley Lane
Kissimmee, FL 34744
(321) 697-3000
Fax (321) 697-3010
efoe@osceola.org
osceola.ifas.ufl.edu
Date: October 31st, 2004