HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

HISTORY

Winter months are prime time for tourists. Snowbirds fly south (or drive in) to escape the blustery cold and heavy snow that has really pushed them south this year. Statewide tourism numbers are up so the economy should be feeling the effects. I know the roads and stores are feeling the effects.

Did you know tourists have been coming here long before the major attractions came to town? And they come here now for more than the attractions.

People come to Florida for our wildlife, lakes, fishing, rivers, springs, beaches, forests and prairies. Our mild climate, offshore breezes and sunsets add to the atmosphere that visitors enjoy today. The beauty and natural resources are part of a natural system that must be considered as tourism continues to influence Osceola County.

While there are many benefits of tourism, there are costs as we all know. Most don't consider the impact on the natural world around us. We must become stewards of the environment to help plan growth with minimal impact on the precious resources that have attracted visitors for so long.

Early developers, Hamilton Disston, Henry Flagler and Henry Plant changed the face of Florida forever. Osceola County was part of a central cross link for travelers going from the St. Johns River in Sanford to South Florida resorts. While Flagler’s railroads spread development on the east coast, Plant’s rail system took visitors to Tampa or Kissimmee and then by river boat to Ft. Myers. Disston purchased land from the state for a song, merely a quarter per acre. Draining land for sugar plantations and settlement was Disston’s plan. Draining the swamps and prairies opened central and south Florida to the agricultural community as well as the developers.

As the area grew, old growth cypress trees were logged out for lumber. Settlers in the area produced shingles from the trees giving the name to Shingle Creek. Invasive Chinese tallow trees and ear trees now threaten this creek swamp.

Drained lands became grazing areas for Florida's huge cattle industry. Now, large tracts of land are converted to housing developments almost overnight. It has been said that the last crop we plant is pavement.

Development is important, but destruction of ecosystems has tremendous environmental impact which affects each of us, not just those who enjoy fishing, swimming or viewing natural beauty. Watersheds cleanse our groundwater, support biological diversity, purify the air, produce oxygen and much more.

Preplanning can create development in harmony with natural systems without destroying them. But, it will take a demand from citizens to convince regulators, developers and builders that concern for the environment is worth paying for.

Now is the time to get involved in the process of developing our revised Comprehensive Plan for balancing growth and the environment. Attend the upcoming series of workshops to determine how and where our county will grow. Citizens can hear presentations by staff on a variety of topics related to growth. Citizen input is encouraged. The meetings are scheduled by the Osceola County Planning Department over the next few months. Call 407-343-3100 for an updated schedule.

It is true that we need to grow to meet future needs, but we can also strive for a balance of growth with least impact on the environment.

Contact our University of Florida/IFAS Osceola County Extension Office for tips on how to reduce
environmental impact during construction. We offer continuing education classes to building contractors, inspectors, realtors, landscapers and property managers to help them reduce their impact on the environment.

There are a variety of classes offered to help you understand the natural systems in your yard. A FREE Garden School series of night classes is being offered that provides basic, practical information regarding lawns, trees, citrus, pests and pruning. The next session on Creating Perfect Lawns is March 4 and Trees for Central Florida is March 6 at 7 pm. Learn how to make a rain barrel at a class on March 7 at 1 pm. A $20 fee includes the barrel to take home. An extensive class schedule is listed on the web at http://osceola.ifas.ufl.edu/oce/calendar.htm Call 321-697-3000 to pre-register.

You can learn how to save energy and water and get more house for the money at an upcoming Smart Home Buyer class. Whether you are considering buying a new or "previously loved" home, the class will save you money as you shop. The next class will be held Friday, March 7 from 9 am until noon at the Extension Office at Osceola Heritage Park. Call 321-697-3000 to register or get notice of future classes. Home shoppers, builders, real estate sales personnel and lenders are invited to attend.

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