

# HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

## LOVE A LAKE

July is National Lake Appreciation Month. To know them is to love them.

Our local lakes have been bringing visitors here long before Uncle Walt built his major theme parks down the road. They provided recreation in the form of local swimming holes and fishing spots. They were a source of commerce providing a link to livestock and vegetable markets in South Florida on the Gulf Coast.

Many tourists rode the riverboats to get to tropical resorts. Natural areas near the lakes provided prime habitat for wild game including deer, turkey, and quail. These animals were food for Native Americans as well as the European settlers that moved in.

As Florida became more populated and Hamilton Disston bought up much of the county, our landscape changed forever. The lakes were prime features but the surrounding wetlands were considered useless swamp land. Disston's dredges began to connect a network of lakes, drain the swamps and create drier land for agriculture and development.

While some would like to move the clock back and change that land deal, most of us living here now have benefited from the huge ecological impacts of those changes. Many of our home-sites are located on land that would have only been accessible by flat boat part of the year. We eat beef that grazes on our pastures and is then shipped west for fattening, then shipped back to our local supermarkets.

There are many groups that work hard to take care of our lakes. For years, the Kissimmee-St. Cloud Jaycees have been involved in periodic cleanup of our Kissimmee lakefront. Scout groups, air boaters, 4-H Clubs and the Alligator Lake Homeowners' Association were just a few of the volunteer groups that help clean up litter and debris that collects along the shoreline. If you are interested in getting involved in the next cleanup event, contact Kimberly Lawrence, our new Lakes Management Specialist for Osceola County at 407-343-2600.

University of Florida Lakewatch volunteers collect water samples monthly for processing at UF labs to monitor water quality. They enjoy getting out on our lakes and are concerned enough to dedicate a half day a month to sampling for clarity, depth, nutrients and chlorophyll (greenness). If you have a boat, airboat, canoe or kayak and enjoy boating on our local lakes, consider becoming a volunteer. Staff provide training and loan equipment and then host an annual picnic to explain the data and provide information about aquatic plants and insects common on our lakes. Call Cindy Rutherford at 321-697-3000 or email me at [efoe@osceola.org](mailto:efoe@osceola.org) to get more information.

Boating groups such as the Tohopekaliga Yacht Club, have fun, enjoy cookouts and poker runs and have many boating activities on our local lakes. They meet the first Monday of the Month (next meeting is July 11, at the City of Kissimmee CRA office by the shuffleboard courts on Monument Ave). You can send them a note requesting membership info and a cruise schedule by writing to TYC, PO Box 420524, Kissimmee, FL 34742. Upcoming activities include a cruises in Clearwater and Tampa areas.

Fishing is a popular hobby and a lucrative sport locally. Stop by any of the local tackle shops such as Big Toho Enterprises on the Kissimmee Lakefront, Richardson's Fish Camp off Kings Highway or the Fishing Pad II in St. Cloud. You can get more than bait and tackle and fishing tips. All of the record size fish landed were caught on their special lures (or at least that is the tale you'll hear!) Be sure to ask them about fishing license requirements. For more information on access to our local lakes, contact the Convention and Visitors Bureau on Highway 192 and Bill Beck Blvd. at 407-847-5000 and request a Nature and Heritage Guide.

Many residents live on lakefront lots. Some are on community lakes that are really stormwater ponds, designed to capture rainwater runoff from streets and property and collect it for reduction of pollutants before it slowly seeps into the ground. Landscaping, mowing, pet care and road maintenance all have a great impact on the health and safety of these lakes.

With near record rainfall in June, many folks have been paying close attention to lake and pond levels with concerns about flooding. You can help the lakes and prevent flooding by keeping the storm drains in streets and parking lots clear of debris. Sticks and branches and grass clippings that get into the drains clog them and slow the water flow, increasing the chances of flooding.

Never pour anything you would not drink down these drains. They connect to our ground water which flows underground to our lakes. While our lakes are not a source of drinking water currently, this is being considered in the future. Stay tuned on this issue.

At Osceola Heritage Park, we are working closely with the landscape maintenance service offered by Rich Stelley to reduce impacts to our local ponds. Working with UF/IFAS recommendations, they quit mowing the edges of the ponds. Now, in the 6 to 10 foot wide "no mow - no fertilizer" buffer, we have discovered a tremendous diversity of plants. We went from one species, bahiagrass sod for erosion control, to more than 65 species of plants on each of the 4 ponds. This diversity is important for filtering nutrients from surface water runoff around the pond, trapping litter and debris before it gets into the pond and providing food and shelter for wildlife that visit the ponds.

July is hot and a great time to love a lake. Go swimming, fishing, boating or picnicking and enjoy the lakes that brought our early settlers to the area and provide great quality of life for us now.

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