HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

MASTER NATURALIST

If I asked you to climb 50 feet every day, you would think I was nuts. Where do we have 50 foot buildings? But, you don't have to climb stairs to climb 50 feet. Just drive west from Kissimmee or St. Cloud toward Disney and Highway 27 and you have climbed about 50 feet in elevation. That's right, nose bleed zone. The rolling sandy lands on the west side of our county are over 100 feet above sea level.

A 50 foot elevation change has subtle implications to most of us. You may barely realize any difference if you are used to the high peaks of the Rocky Mountains or the Smokies. But, even slight land elevation changes can have dramatic impacts on plants and wildlife.

The white sandy soils on the west side of the county were once ancient sand dunes. They formed centuries ago when the sea water level was higher and ocean waves lapped at our coasts and deposited deep sands in the middle of the state. The high water surrounded islands of isolated high ground and plants and animals developed unique connections.

We call the association of plants and animals an ecosystem and this particular type is called Scrub. Rare sand skinks, scrub mint, and scrub jays are specific only to this type of ecosystem and are found nowhere else in the world.

The natural landscape has changed over time with human influence. The rolling sandy soils are high and dry and ideally suited some types of agriculture. Citrus trees and grape vines prefer well drained soils and grow well in this region. Cold air from winter nights flows downhill into the low depressions in the bottoms of the rolling hills. Water in the lowlands is solar heated during the day and warms cold air at night offering protection from frosts and mild freezes.

Native plants that are typical of scrub soils evolved to survive on summer rain and tolerate winter freezes. Wild plums, rusty lyonia, Chapman's oak, runner oak, wire grass, gopher apple, golden aster and hawthorns are natives tolerant of dry conditions and cold winters. Unfortunately, many of the tropical landscape plants selected for home landscapes in these areas are not so tolerant.

Spring and summer storms bring lightning and fires. Fire is a natural process that helps to recycle nutrients into the soil as the ash that remains is washed into the sand. Frequent fires favor low shrubs and wildflowers and plants that develop survival strategies such as thick bark and deep, well developed root systems.

Scrub jays are adapted to the scrub since the fires keep the soil exposed and allow easy feeding on acorns that fall to the ground. If fire is not frequent enough and the oak canopy becomes dense or pines grow tall, scrub jays are more likely to be eaten by predators such as hawks that prefer to perch in high trees.

The relationships of plants and animals and how they developed together is so interesting. I encourage you to learn more about our natural world and look for ways to work with it as you enjoy your landscape.

One way to learn more is to attend Woods Walks. The next free interpretive walk is scheduled for Thursday, January 25 at 9 am east of St. Cloud. We will go to Lake Lizzie Preserve on the Marsh Loop. You will learn about the sand pine, oak hammock and slash pine ecosystems as well as the marsh. Send an email to crut@osceola.org for an upcoming schedule or call Cindy at 321-697-3015 to reserve your space.

Many have been waiting for the next Florida Master Naturalist training. I will be teaching about upland ecosystems including scrub, oak hammock and pinelands. The program is open to anyone interested in Florida, especially those who want to know more about the outdoors. Environmental professionals, teachers, volunteers, nature guides, eco-tour operators, land planners, scout leaders and outdoor enthusiasts will find the program interesting. The reference manual includes nearly 1000 pages of information on plants, birds, mammals, soils, insects, reptiles and interactions. The training is 6 full days and includes classroom presentations and field trips.
The program is limited to 20 students and starts Wednesday, April 18, continuing through May 23.

The class is now posted on the web at [http://www.MasterNaturalist.org](http://www.MasterNaturalist.org) and registration is online or you can call Cindy for a faxable form.

Join me for a presentation on stormwater ponds at the City of Kissimmee Civic Center on Tuesday, January 23rd at 6:45 pm. Kissimmee Valley Audubon is hosting the program that is open to the public. Learn more about stormwater ponds and neighborhood lakes and get answers to common questions about how to take care of them and how to manage weeds and wildlife.

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