HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

WHAT IS IFAS?

What is the best kept secret in Osceola County? The University of Florida is in town.

When you speak of a university locally, most folks think of University of Central Florida (UCF) in Orlando. I remind them that THE University of Florida is here, too.

University of Florida/IFAS Osceola County Extension is an off campus branch of UF and is jointly funded by the Florida legislature, the Osceola County Board of County Commissioners and the US Department of Agriculture. We are a joint partnership with Osceola County so our administrative headquarters are in Gainesville at UF and at the Osceola County Administration Building. "We are with the government and we are here to help you!"

The Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS) is a statewide network that "develops knowledge in Agricultural Resources, Human Resources, Natural Resources, Life Sciences and makes that knowledge accessible to sustain and enhance the quality of human life". IFAS, pronounced eye'-fuss, has Extension offices in all 67 counties.

In addition to offering classes on the UF campus, IFAS has facilities for teaching, research and demonstration located throughout the state as Research and Education Centers (REC's) such as the Mid-Florida REC in Apopka and the Citrus REC in Lake Alfred.

What does UF/IFAS mean to our residents? We are a non-biased source of information and we have a variety of services backed by research to help solve practical problems.

I just celebrated 23 years as an extension agent for University of Florida/IFAS. I am the natural resources agent for the University of Florida/IFAS Osceola County Extension Office. The term agent relates to the agent of the federal government like CIA agent or IRS agent. I'm really a public educator.

I worked in environmental education throughout my career. For 22 years I was the horticulture agent, focusing on home gardening and landscapes. Now, we have a new horticulture agent and two program assistants.

My new responsibilities are in educating the public and decision-makers on natural land management issues and conservation of air, water and soil. I work with builders and home buyers to develop energy efficient housing and sustainable communities that conserve our natural resources as the population grows.

Osceola County Extension is for youth and adults. We work with volunteers who organize 31 4-H clubs helping 700 youth develop leadership and citizenship skills as they learn about a variety of subjects. Next week kids are learning about gardening at the Jr. Master Gardener Program and will be discovering wildlife and having fun with forestry.

Residents that have questions about gardening, fruits, houseplants, landscapes, pests in and around the home or attracting wildlife can get help through our horticulture classes, newsletters, and online questions and answers. We have a new bilingual horticulture assistant, Eva Pabon who is helping residents diagnose plant problems in the Plant Clinic.

Tuesday, March 25th, 7-9, you can take a class to learn practical tips to have a low maintenance yard. Call our office at 321-697-3000 to pre-register. Other classes are listed online at our website at http://osceola.ifas.ufl.edu/.

The horticulture program is hosting "Gardens of Osceola Tour" on Saturday, April 12. Do you have a
yard that uses "Florida Friendly" landscape practices such as low water use plants, wildlife habitat, low volume irrigation, natural lakefront landscaping, native plants? Want to brag and help others learn? Contact Jessica Sullivan. If you want to see these examples in other’s yards, call to pre-register.

In addition to horticulture and youth, we help agricultural producers compete in a global economy. We expect to have a new agricultural agent on board this summer.

We have two agents working in the area of Family and Consumer Sciences helping improve the health of our citizens with nutrition and food safety education, financial resource management through good consumer purchase decisions and offering food safety certification to food managers.

A Family Nutrition Program agent and three program assistants provide information on nutrition to limited resource families so they can stretch their food dollars for better family nutrition.

Our new Extension office is located in the Extension Services building at Osceola Heritage Park. The new entrance is off Bill Beck Boulevard across from Gateway High School. While special events such as Kissimmee Bluegrass, the Osceola County Fair and the Astros games are at the same complex, our office is a year round service to local residents.

Oops, I let the secret out. This is one secret you will want to share with everyone you know.

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