YOUTH GO WILD

It is fun going wild about wildlife and walking in the woods to learn more about our natural ecosystems. Both youth and adults are enjoying learning about Florida’s wild side through a variety of UF/IFAS Osceola County Extension sponsored activities.

Woods Walks are popular with residents and visitors who recently took guided tours of Osceola County’s 1000 acre Lake Lizzie Preserve located off Highway 192 and Old Melbourne Highway. The park is in the process of being developed so trail maps are not available yet. The walks give participants a close up look at oak hammocks, pine flatwoods and wetlands along the shore of Lake Lizzie.

Future Woods Walks are scheduled in February at the Sunset Ranch Interpretive Trail, located south of St. Cloud at Three Lakes Wildlife Management Area. Tours in March will be at The Nature Conservancy's Disney Wilderness Preserve near Poinciana. Call Mariaisabel at the UF/IFAS Osceola County Extension office at 321-697-3000 for dates, times and location. Walks are offered on weekdays as well as weekends.

Senior High students will be testing their knowledge of the environment at the Soil and Water Conservation District's Envirothon on Thursday, February 26 in Orlando. Teams of 5 students work together to answer questions related to trees, wildlife, soils, water conservation, aquatic plants and other environmental topics. The activities at the Envirothon help students understand more about our natural world. Environmental professionals help students prepare for the annual contest by sharing practical information related to their careers. Teachers and home school parents can call our Extension office to request information packets.

Youth, ages 10 and older are preparing for the Natural Resources Bowl sponsored by our UF/IFAS 4-H program and the Central Florida Fair on Saturday, March 6. The exciting game show format pits teams of 4 youths against each other to test their general knowledge of a variety of environmental topics ranging from alligators to zooplankton, Florida ecosystems, water cycles and wetlands. Some participants already have a good general knowledge of our natural resources, but study materials are available for those who are seriously interested in learning more and being the first to buzz in with the correct answer. Youth with an interest in our natural resources have until February 20 to join 4-H and participate in this activity. Call the Osceola County Extension 4-H office at 321-697-3000 for more information.

Field trips and activities are planned during the next few months to help youth learn more about Florida trees, wildlife, forest problems and ecosystems. Then youth are invited to participate in the 4-H Forest Ecology Contest and 4-H Wildlife Habitat Evaluation Program, (WHEP) which will be held in the University of Florida's Austin Cary Forest on Saturday, April 17. Youth participate in teams of 3 or 4 and move through various contest activities during the morning. Educational programs on bats, bugs and plant identification as well as nature walks and nature crafts are part of the fun day’s events.

Participants will learn about reading topographic maps and aerial photographs. These skills are used by land managers as they plan strategies to improve wildlife habitat. They will also play games to learn about a variety of Florida birds and mammals and their food and habitat needs. Adults are needed to help the teams prepare. If you do not have experience but want to learn, join the fun and learn along with the youth.
4-H is more than you ever imagined. It is open to youth ages 5 to 18. It only takes 5 youth and an interested adult to form a 4-H club but there are many located throughout the county already. Call the 4-H Office or stop and chat with a volunteer leader.

Ask a 4-H member and they will tell you it is a lot of fun! Shhhh. Don't spoil the fun and tell them they are learning too.

Thanks to the careful reader who caught me in a major error in my recent column on compact fluorescent lamps. I incorrectly stated that changing five frequently used incandescent bulbs to CFL's would save $60 per month. I got a little too excited, I guess, as you actually save about $60 per year. If you invested in the technology expecting the huge savings each month, please call me for a special gift to help you save even more money. Please forgive my enthusiasm and I will proofread more carefully in the future.

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