PLANT LIFE COLUMN

FARM CITY DAYS

Agriculture is a major part of our local economy and contributes to our community's character and quality of life.

According to the federal agriculture census, 485 farms produced almost $88.8 million in sales for livestock, crops and poultry and their products. This value surpassed Osceola County income from tourism in 1999.

Although the average Florida farm is 232 acres, Osceola has huge ranches averaging 1,259 acres. Farmers and ranchers have been stewards of the land for generations, protecting wetlands and woodlands and preserving vast tracts of woods and water for wildlife habitat.

Osceola County ranks No. 1 in the state in the number of beef cows and third in the state in the number of cattle and calves. Citrus is another major agricultural commodity produced locally. Our 15,273 acres of citrus yield 5.6 million commercial boxes of fruit.

Osceola agriculture is more than cattle and oranges. Agdbusinesses include tissue-culture plants, sod production, retail and wholesale nurseries, watermelons, eggs, poultry, goats, sheep, hogs, timber, mulch, feed and fertilizer as well as aquaculture production of tropical fish and aquatic plants. Nursery production and landscape maintenance businesses have grown as our population has increased in recent years.

Nationally, less than 2 percent of the population is involved directly in producing food, fiber and shelter, while about 27 percent of all jobs are in the country are in the food industry. As a result, fewer residents are familiar with the challenges facing agricultural producers in the new century. Key issues of concern include competition from foreign products, imported pests, integrated pest management, increased regulations, new technology, best management practices, environmental protection, increased land values, estate taxes, and labor costs and availability.

Florida's rapid population increase, urban growth, increased land values and the effects of estate taxes are forcing farms to be subdivided, affecting profitability and management decisions.

Research has resulted in more productive characteristics in livestock and crops. Retail cuts of meat are now leaner with lower cholesterol. New cooking oils have been developed from agricultural commodities that are lower in saturated fats, reducing the risk of heart disease.

Biotechnology and genetically modified organisms are not new to agriculture. For example, slow-ripening tomatoes, herbicide-resistant soybeans and vitamin-rich rice are commodities currently on the market. As a result of research and new technology, foods are more nutritious, stay fresh longer and are not damaged by microbes and insects, reducing the need for pesticides and reducing waste and spoilage. Our borders have expanded, and we have a global economy now. Whenever possible, buy locally grown or domestic produce and goods to support our local economy. Contact the extension office for information on Florida-grown products and their availability.

The challenges the agricultural community faces affect us all at the cash register so it is important that we work together to achieve the common goal of providing food, fiber and shelter for our families and the world.

Learn more about Osceola agriculture at Farm City Days Nov. 15 and 16 at the first event in the new Osceola Heritage Park on U.S. Highway 192 at the site of the old agricultural center.

Limited seating is available for farm tours from 1:30 to 4:30 p.m. Nov. 15. Call Faye at 407-846-4181 to
reserve your seat. Educational exhibits are free and open to the public from 2 to 8 p.m. Nov. 15 and 9 a.m. to noon Nov. 16.

A home-cooked steak dinner is available at 6 p.m. Nov. 15 by reservation for $10 per person. Join in fun and games for all ages from 10 a.m. to noon Nov. 16 at Family Farm Fun Day, which includes milking contests, sack races and an orange-juice squeeze-off. Call Carrie at 407-846-4181 for reservations.

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