



# Agri-link

### Upcoming Seminars and Workshops

- Florida Master Naturalist Program (Wetlands) Oct 3–Nov 14, 2008
- Annual Urban Pond Management Seminar December 11, 2008

To register call 239-533-7500, or visit our website

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### Developing a Agro-biodiesel Sector - Is Florida Transitioning to 'Flex' Farms?

Agriculture has always been one of Florida's major industries, and contributed overwhelmingly to the economic fortunes of the state since its inception.

In 2005 Florida had 42,500 commercial farms, using up a total of 10,000,000 acres. Over the years, Florida ranked first in the United States in the value of production of oranges, grapefruit and tangerines, although recent setbacks impacting industry have seen a 69% decline in income between 1995 and 2005.

**Citrus incomes:**  
'95-'96 = \$1,075,817,000  
'04-'05 = \$742,201,000

Despite this, the agricultural, food manufacturing, and natural resource industries are significant components of the Florida economy, with overall income rising over the last decade, indicating that Florida's farm diversity and productivity are on the constant upswing. Revenue grew from a total of 62 billion dollars in 2000 to 100.25 billion dollars in 2006.

Back in the early 1990s, U.S.

farmers took note of the first Gulf War, rising energy prices, and a huge glut of excess soybean oil sitting in tanks around the country, and they saw an opportunity to refine Soybean oil to make biodiesel. The idea caught on and in 1992 the National SoyDiesel Development Board was formed to study biodiesel production based on the European model. In 1994, when the organization's name was changed to the National Biodiesel Board (NBB), fuels produced from soybean oil amounted to barely a few thousand gallons a year. But ten years later, that volume had grown to 25 million gallons, mainly due to the efforts of the NBB.

Farmers in Florida have recently began to take notice of yet another source of biodiesel which appears to have a real potential for production in Florida. In less than two years, there are more than 12 Jatropha curcas farmers across Southwest Florida, and although cultivation is largely experimental at the moment, the trends and findings indi-

cate that this crop will contribute to Florida's farming incomes as the production of a high quality vegetable oil crop suitable for bio-energy becomes increasingly adopted. It is far too early to tell how much of an impact Jatropha curcas will have on the fortunes of the agricultural industry, but a transition is underway that signals once again that Florida Agriculture has stepped up to the plate to answer the call for a much needed commodity.

Perhaps the decline in fortunes for the citrus and sugar industries is the beginning of a powerful new trend which will provide the 'Flex Farms' necessary for powering the flex cars of the future.



Portion of a 60 acre Jatropha farm in LaBelle, Florida.

THANK YOU!..FROM  
THE AGENT'S DESK...



Letha L. Giacinti

Dear Reader,

Over the last three years I have had the honor of working with the lady whose photograph appears above.

Normally, my photograph would appear in that spot, but I truly feel compelled to make this exception in order to publicly express my sincere thanks to Letha Giacinti for serving as my Administrative Assistant for what feels now, like just a brief period of time.

In the three years I have worked with Letha she has been instrumental in helping to orient my programs, plan seminars, facilitate interface with clientele, coordinate volunteers, answer questions, offer me a cup of tea or coffee without me asking, and suggesting I go to lunch (because most times I forget to do so).

BY the middle of September 2008 my phone message will no longer have the age-old recording to 'speak to Letha' while I am out and unavailable. You see, after serving for nearly two decades with the Lee County Extension Office, Letha leaves us for the wonderful world of retirement.

Please join me in saying thanks to Letha for her years of service, and most of all, for having made the lives of the people we serve much the better for having been here. Take care Letha. We will all miss you. Remember us sometimes while you enjoy the bliss...and God bless.

Sincerely,

Roy. ....

## The Downtown Fort Myers Farmer's Market— By Otto Parisho

**This season the Farmers Market has welcomed a group of Master Gardeners to run a booth to help the public with problems with their plants and home gardens.**

It seems to have been a successful program. Although they have not always had all of the answers, the Master Gardeners have tried very hard to do as much as they could to help their friends and neighbors of Fort Myers with good information.

Essentially, they convey valuable published information to the public supplied by the University of Florida through the IFAS (Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences ) Extension of Lee county.

We are very lucky here in Lee

County to have such a fine

organization to lean on for help and information. With the help and guidance of the Extension Office, the Master Gardeners have been able to hand out literature and advice on the plants and flowers that we have here in Lee County. We hope that we can continue to be of service and relay the University of Florida's knowledge to many more of our friends and neighbors.

All of the agents at the Extension Office have been very supportive of the Master Gardener program. They have seen to it that they have information and handouts for each of the different departments of the Extension.

We are quite fortunate here in Lee County as we most likely have the highest of quality of agents at our Ex-

ension Office. They are most willing to help with anything they can, and to refer to the University any topic that need greater attention.

There is an IFAS Extension in each county in the State and if you are not familiar with your county extension you should spend a little time to find out where yours is, and visit to see how they can help you with your plant and gardening needs.

**The Master Gardeners are an all volunteer group that just want to help their friends and neighbors with their knowledge of trees and plants that grow so well in our area.**

So keep those green thumbs dirty...

**For information on becoming a Master Gardener or a Extension Volunteer, call 239-533-7500**

## Finding Our Way Back Home (Grown) - By Denise S. Muir

**The impact that the transportation of food has on our environment is stirring up a storm of social consciousness in many people.**

In 2002, produce transported from field to consumer resulted in the emission of 19 million tons of carbon dioxide. For decades produce has been hybridized to withstand its journey to the end user. With this heartier, more transportable produce, consumers are able to enjoy the year round fruits and vegetables that once were only available "in season". Some would say that this convenience comes at a high price to the taste, nutrient content, local economy, and our environment. Consider the following information on food transportation:

In 2003, **The Christian Science Monitor** published an article that stated, "There's a tragic loss of quality when

food travels halfway around the world. Within the US, "fresh" food is typically hauled an average of 1,500 to 2,500 miles from farm to table, 25 percent farther than in 1980.

In an article by the **Natural Resource Defense Council**, they write that every year, nearly 270 million pounds of grapes arrive in California from Chile to the Port of Los Angeles. Their 5,900 mile journey in cargo ships and trucks releases 7,000 tons of global warming pollution each year.

**The Food Routes Network** states that fruits and vegetables shipped from distant states and countries can spend as many as seven to fourteen days in transit before they arrive in a supermarket. The network goes on to say that most fruit and

vegetable varieties sold in supermarkets are chosen for their ability to withstand industrial harvesting equipment and extended travel, not taste. This results in little variety in the plants grown.

Consumers are on a constant search for new ways to look at food-whether it is for health, social consciousness, or simply following the next new trend. Buying locally grown foods is clearly becoming the battle cry of many consumers. Purchasing local produce doesn't mean that fruits and vegetables will cost the consumer less, it means that the consumer will be paying for freshness and taste, not transportation. It also empowers people to feel that they are making a contribution, however large or small, to the betterment of the world they live in.

## Understanding Florida's Snakes—the Eastern Indigo Snake



Although it has the term 'indigo' in its name, the Eastern Indigo Snake is much more black than blue. It is of significance in Florida mainly because it is listed as a threatened species, but also it is the largest non-venomous snake in North

America. Individuals up to eight feet in length have been measured.

The Eastern Indigo is fairly common in cabbage palm forests in east-central Florida, in other habitats along the west coast, and frequently in areas around ponds. It often seeks sheltered refuges such as gopher tortoise and armadillo burrows where it carries out functions such as egg laying and shedding. These burrows are also used for providing protection from dehydration and temperature

extremes.

E. Indigo snakes are meat-eaters and will eat almost any animal up to about squirrel size. It feeds especially heavily on frogs and snakes and will eat rattlesnakes and other pit vipers because they are immune to their venom. The Eastern Indigo Snake has been classified as a threatened species. The main reason for its decline is habitat loss. As habitats become further fragmented by roads, Indigos will be increasingly vulnerable to highway mortal-

ity as they travel through their large territories. Even where development is low-density, Indigo snakes can fall victim to domestic dogs. Other practices such as commercial collecting, gassing of gopher tortoise burrows, killing by uninformed persons, and chemicals take their toll on the species, further decreasing their numbers.

**To learn more about this snake, read the fact sheet "Eastern indigo Snake; a Threatened Species" at: <http://edis.ifas.edu/uw063>**

## Understanding our Florida Ponds and Lakes



Living in Florida for many of us is a dream come true, but very often the dream becomes a nightmare when we are confronted with the challenges presented by the needs of our landscape plants and lawns.

Very often, a significant part of the landscape in which plants do grow is missed or taken for granted because it tends to sit in our backyards and does its extremely valuable job silently. Attention is only paid to it when things go out of equilibrium and a shocking blue or blue-green scum forms over the top of the tranquil surface, and when this happens the nightmare really begins. You guessed it; I'm talking about the quiet pond, or 'lake,' as northerners prefer to call it. The ponds we have in our yards are stormwater facili-

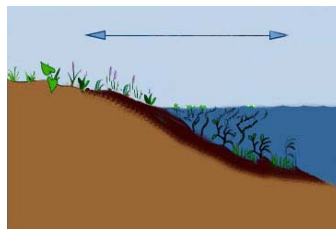
ties designed to collect and hold water that has already passed through the yard around it, other yards that drain into it, as well as the drains leading to it from the connection of gutters from streets in the neighborhood.

To provide the extra nutrients for grass or plants to grow in our landscape, we often use fertilizer. As water flows over land, it picks up some of these nutrients in the soil and carries them into the pond. It also picks up other materials and contaminants from the street drains. These nutrients then provide for the growth of either algae, or other plants, depending on conditions, and when algae grow in large quantities due to excessive nutrient levels, we refer to the blue-green coloration as an algae bloom.

The amount of plants in any pond is often held in check by the level of nutrients in the pond. If nutrient loads are high there will be the possibility for the pond holding lots of plants, and con-

versely, if there are less nutrients the pond will be incapable of holding many plants. When ponds bloom green due to algae or duckweed – which is also a common small plant that grows in pond water – it is simply nature's way of balancing the equilibrium and making sure the excess nutrients are used up. That disgusting sight is boldly telling us that we have overloaded our pond water most often by the actions we carry out in the surrounding landscape.

To clean up the water in our ponds and reduce the incidence of blooms, we can simply introduce native species of aquatic or water tolerant plants into and around the shoreline to strain out undesirable material and absorb nutrients which will inevitably end up in the wa-



ter.

Species of flowering plants such as Pickerel Weed, Duck Potato and Yellow Canna add a welcoming aquascaped appearance on the water's edge while helping to stabilize the pond bank and prevent the proliferation of algae and duckweed.

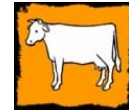
Of course, changes in landscaping habits in the yard will reduce the amount of nutrients and improve pond water quality. Suggestions include the use of 'slow-release' fertilizers; having soil or dirt tested to determine your specific nutrient needs; composting leaves and not allowing them to clog drains and get into ponds; picking up after pets; washing the car over lawn to prevent run-off and conserve water.

**After all, mistakes in the landscape do not stay there. They end up in our ponds and cost money. A healthy pond is a good indicator of the general health of the surrounding environment, and the benefit of an ecology in balance is priceless.**

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**FARM JOKE**



**To Bee, or Not to Pee**



A farmer was driving down the dusty road leading to his farm and ran out of gas. Just at that moment, a bee flew in his window. The bee said, "What seems to be the problem"?

"I'm out of gas," the farmer responded despondently. The bee told the farmer to wait right there and flew away.

Minutes later, the farmer watched as an entire swarm of bees flew to his car and into his gas tank.

After a few minutes, the bees flew out. "Try it now," said one bee. The farmer turned the ignition key and the car started right up. "Wow!" he exclaimed.

"What did you put in my gas tank"?

The bee answered, "BP."

**Disclaimer:** This joke does not endorse a particular fuel retailer, but fully supports the use of biofuels :-).

**The Lee County Sustainability Program— Martha C. Avila; Program Coordinator**



Referred to in affectionate terms as the **SustainabLEE Program**, the Sustainability Program in Lee County has been created given the need to preserve the values of our natural environment and resources, while enabling the capacity to meet the economic, social and political challenges for achieving the necessary balance toward a more sustainable community.

The SustainabLEE Program is helping to connect individuals, businesses and government; promoting sustainability in a wide range of aspects including sustainable agriculture, water conservation, 'green' buildings and energy efficient techniques which are cost competitive, environmentally compatible and renewable.

The program contributes to improving our quality of life through living-green choices, therefore reducing our ecological footprint while contributing to minimizing the impact of global warming.

Given the extreme **NEED** to act now in the face of Climate Change and the depletion of fossil oil resources, the program is also focused on promoting the development and implementation of alternative renewable energies. Energy is the fuel of growth; it is the essential requirement for economic and social development. Climate change offers us real opportunities and challenges to develop and place our society on a more sustainable path. SustainabLEE offers opportunities to show our ability to preserve the future of our planet and hence our children's future, considering that we have the bigger mission, "**ONE PLANET TO SAVE**".

As you seek the means to becoming better stewards of the environment we welcome your contact and support so that together we can explore green solutions for our economic and environmental welfare. **The solutions are in our hands!**



*Martha C. Avila*

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COOPERATIVE EXTENSION WORK IN AGRICULTURE, FAMILY AND CONSUMER SCIENCE, STATE OF FLORIDA, IFAS, UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND BOARDS OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS COOPERATING.