

Florida brings Agriculture into the Classroom

By: Corine Burgess

Did you know that the main source of economic activity in Highlands County is agriculture? Most of our agriculture is comprised of citrus, cattle and dairy. Highlands is the third largest county in Florida for growing citrus. Florida is ranked 10th in production of beef cattle in the nation. With all this agriculture surrounding us, isn't it important that our children understand what agriculture is all about?

Enter Agriculture in the Classroom, a non-profit organization that recruits volunteers to reach out to our youth and teach them about agriculture. Ag in the Classroom provides materials and curricula on agriculture, which is used to educate students about its importance. The organization also provides grants that enable teachers and volunteers to educate our youth about where food comes from and the importance of farmers to their communities. Their funding comes from sales of the specialty agricultural license plate known as the Ag Tag. Every time someone purchases one of these tags it allows the company to hold the annual Florida Agriculture Literacy Day, award over \$400,000.00 in grant money, sponsor workshops and send teachers and administrators to the National Ag in the Classroom conference.

Each year, the Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District takes part in this important educational event. Staff members choose a school and read the selected agricultural book to the students. This year the book is entitled *Green Florida Farms*, written by Gary Seamans and Illustrated by Mike Wright. The book gives a bit of history about Florida farming as well as teaching kids what is involved in the process of working the land. In addition to reading the book, it is a great opportunity to talk to the students about agriculture and find out how much they know about it.

Agriculture is so much more than row crops, cows in the field and orange trees. Agriculture has many branches and in today's world, it is more essential than ever for our youth to get familiar with the subject. Much of our fuel is now stemming from agriculture – with the oil issues we face, biofuels and ethanol are becoming increasingly popular. These fuels are made up of plants and plant waste. Electricity can also be generated from methane gas from animal waste and field waste (biomass). Many plants and animals are genetically altered to produce different medicines. Cut flowers and ornamental plants are another branch of the agricultural industry. Aquaculture, or the raising of fish and aquatic critters, is another interesting part of the agriculture industry.

Unfortunately, many children's experience of agriculture may be a one day field trip to a farm. Perhaps they get to pet a goat or pig at a petting zoo. Kids need to understand where our food comes from and how essential the agricultural industry is for each and every one of us. If not for agriculture, we would have no houses, clothes, food or many other essentials we depend on every day.

Take some time and educate your child or grandchild about agriculture and its importance. It can be as simple as talking about what you see when taking a drive or walk. Talk about pastures, cows and all the materials we get from the farms as you drive by them. Watch educational shows on the television that educate on the history of agriculture in our country.

Take the kids on a trip to the different farms in your area or sign up for an informative agricultural field trip. There are so many opportunities and chances for you to learn about agriculture in this county. We are fortunate in Highlands County. We have so much agriculture and natural beauty around us. What better place to be to educate our youth about this important subject?

Here are some interesting facts about agriculture that may help to get your child interested:

- Roosters cannot crow if they cannot fully extend their necks.
- Reindeer milk has more fat than cow's milk.
- Shrimp's hearts are in their heads.
- It is physically impossible for pigs to look up into the sky.
- A donkey will sink in quicksand, but a mule won't.
- The longest recorded flight of a chicken is 13 seconds.
- A full grown bear can run as fast as a horse.
- The average garden-variety caterpillar has 248 muscles in its head.
- Chickens that lay brown eggs have red ear lobes. There is a genetic link between the two.
- Pigs, walruses, and light-colored horses can be sunburned.
- Bees must collect the nectar from two thousand flowers to make one tablespoon of honey.
- A horse cannot vomit; neither can a rabbit.
- There are more beetles than any other kind of creature in the world.
- The pupils of an octopus and a goat are rectangular.
- It is possible to lead a cow upstairs but not downstairs, because a cow's knees cannot bend properly in order to walk down.