Annual conference to teach farming, livestock, local foods, more

GAINESVILLE, Fla. – If you’re thinking of starting a small farm or want to know about the latest in local foods, organic and hydroponic production, livestock production, farmers markets and more, you might consider attending the Florida Small Farms and Alternative Enterprises Conference. Like last year, about 800 people are expected to attend the conference, Aug. 1-2, at Osceola Heritage Park, 1875 Silver Spur Lane in Kissimmee, said Jose Perez, small farms specialty crop statewide program coordinator and the event’s publicity chairman.

Now in its sixth year, the conference is presented by the University of Florida’s Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences and Florida A&M University.

Typically, those who attend include small family, transitional, beginning and experienced farmers; allied-industry representatives; educators; researchers; policy makers; small farm commodity associations; foundations and others dedicated to strengthening Florida’s small farm community.

Ed Skvarch, commercial horticulture extension agent in St. Lucie County, said those pondering farming can learn much of its business side at the conference. “If you’re starting a small farm, I believe it is crucial to have passion, the technical knowledge on how to grow vegetables or raise livestock and a working plan on how to grow the business,” Skvarch said. “Most beginning farmers I work with have the passion and possess some knowledge of growing vegetables; however, what they lack is a plan on how to grow their business. All three are important.”

In addition to teaching participants how to start a farm, the conference raises awareness about Florida’s small farms industry, Perez said.

Participants must register to attend the conference. A reduced fee is available to those who register by July 21. This year, organizers are hosting three tours: urban farming, farm-to-chef and livestock, Perez said. The urban farming and farm-to-chef tours are already full, but, the livestock tour remains open, he said. The conference features vendor exhibits, a signature luncheon featuring local food and about 20 breakout sessions. New sessions this year include:

- Goat, poultry, beef and dairy production management and regulations.
- Management, trends and opportunities in hydroponic production.
- Transitioning to organic production and fertility management for organic farms.
- Weed identification and management, and soil management.
- Training for farmers’ market managers and online farmers’ markets.
- Practical sessions on identifying diseases and pests.
- An Extension Learning Zone, where farmers will work with urban and hydroponic production systems.
For more information about the conference and registration instructions, visit [http://www.conference.ifas.ufl.edu/smallfarms](http://www.conference.ifas.ufl.edu/smallfarms).

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ter: Brad Buck, 352-294-3303, bradbuck@ufl.edu
Source: Jose Perez, 352-294-1692, joseperezoro@ufl.edu
Cutline: Participants take part in the 2011 Florida Small Farms and Alternative Enterprises Conference in Kissimmee. UF/IFAS file photo.