



## Analyzing Alternative Crops

The arrival of greening has created major problems for Florida citrus growers. Before greening came into Florida, citrus growers could get by with relatively few sprays per year. Now, to control psyllids, tree spraying is more frequent. Ron Muraro, citrus economist at the Citrus Research and Education Center, has estimated that dealing with greening has increased production costs by more than \$500 per acre per year.

Prior to greening, some citrus growers could make more than \$1,000 per acre when trees reached maturity, depending on yield, variety, and the price of fruit. With greening, risks are greater, and increased production costs have hurt growers' bottom lines. Given the uncertainty caused by greening, some growers have asked if there are crops other than citrus that have less risk and can give reasonable dollar returns.

### Same Situation, Different Problem

During the 1980s, more than 100,000 acres of citrus north of Interstate 4 were killed by five major freezes. Growers asked if there were crops that were less susceptible to freeze damage that could be grown on citrus land. One suggested alternate crop at that time was cotton. While freezes were not normally an issue with cotton, plantings of cotton in the northern citrus belt did not become popular, partly because the cotton infrastructure and equipment (i.e. cotton gins, etc.) were not available nearby.

Some citrus growers have planted small to moderate acreages of blueberries. Central and North Florida have a climate advantage that allows them to produce good quality blueberries early in the spring. With high prices during this early market window, Florida blueberry growers have made good returns. While the production of Florida blueberries is relatively small


compared to other states, the value of the Florida blueberry crop is second only to Michigan. Jeff Williamson, one of the UF/IFAS blueberry scientists, pointed out that establishment costs for blueberries are high, easily exceeding \$20,000 per acre not including the purchase of land. Fruit prices have been good up to now, but returns were not as good in 2010 because freezes in January and prolonged cold weather during the spring reduced some of the earliness advantage that Florida growers have normally enjoyed. In 2010, fruit from Georgia and other blueberry producing states came in close to the time of the Florida harvest, shortening the length of Florida's early price advantage from past years.

### Exploring Other Options

Other possible alternate crops were discussed at the Farm to Fuel Summit held in Orlando in August. Charles H. Bronson, Commissioner of Agriculture, can be credited with promoting the idea that Florida agriculture can be "a leader in the production and distribution of renewable energy made from Florida grown crops, timber, and other biomass." Dr. Don Rockwood, UF/IFAS professor

emeritus, discussed four fast growing *Eucalyptus grandis* cultivars that, with close spacing and intensive culture, can produce high biomass yields in five years or less, and, after the first harvest, coppice (regrow from the stump) to produce more harvests. Two cultivars with good freeze resistance can be grown from the panhandle down to South Florida. These cultivars have multiple uses including mulch, pulp, energy, and windbreaks. Under various scenarios, growers can make \$150 to \$300 per acre per year.

### Check Around

Before trying any alternate crop, citrus growers should check with growers who have tried these crops. No crop is ideal, and a grower that is new to a crop will have a learning curve. Another complicating factor is that, in spite of greening, citrus growers who had fruit did well this past year. The already small Florida orange crop combined with the January 2010 freezes helped drive the price for processed oranges above \$1.50 per pound solids, and a number of citrus growers did very well. Hence, if prices remain good and growers can control psyllids, citrus may still be one of the best crops to grow. 

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