



Mongi Zekri is never “out of the office”

By Jack Payne, jackpayne@ufl.edu

There's never an out-of-office message on Mongi Zekri's e-mail. He's never out of the office, though he's frequently in LaBelle, Fort Myers, Immokalee, even Egypt or his native Tunisia.

When the UF/IFAS Extension citrus agent was in Egypt recently on behalf of the U.S. Agency for International Development to teach farmers how to grow better oranges, he still responded to Gulf Citrus Growers Association Executive Vice President Ron Hamel within 24 hours.

It says a lot about how Mongi operates, and he's a model for the kind of people we need to keep the citrus industry healthy in the face of the threat from greening. He works hard, generously shares what he knows and recognizes that time is of the essence.

And his name means “savior” in Arabic.

He's UF/IFAS trained, and we got him back to work for us 17 years ago. You know someone's been on the job a while when his office shelves have stacks of Kodak carousel slide trays. He uses PowerPoint nowadays, of course, and takes his show on the road to Hendry, Glades, Lee, Charlotte and Collier counties, his turf as a multi-county citrus agent.

Mongi doesn't stop at the edge of his jurisdiction. He goes where the need is. Part of what makes him so

successful is that he doesn't wait for growers and agencies to come to him.

He was in the Hendry County grove of Peter Stoupas before Stoupas even bought it. The information Stoupas got from Mongi helped the retired high-tech executive decide to invest in a grove that required attention, even though he has no citrus experience. He calls Mongi his go-to guy on everything from nutritional questions to recommendations for rootstocks, and he keeps a Questions for Mongi file on his computer.

FOOTSTEPS IN THE GROVE

Mongi organizes gatherings, conferences and classes. But he also does plenty of one-on-ones as he has with Stoupas. Mongi gets out in the field. The citrus agent puts it this way: “If you don't put your footsteps in a grove, you don't know what's happening.”

And he communicates, communicates, communicates. He just turned in a 90-page report on his past year's activities. Many of you receive his daily e-mails sharing citrus industry news and research updates. And his Flatwoods Citrus newsletter is a must-read in the industry.

The newsletter is also a minor money maker. The ads he sells in the newsletter cover his office supply needs, books, printing, conference



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attendance and the purchase of equipment and expenses for some of the 4-H youth and field day programs. It's not a huge savings for IFAS, but to me it has a lot of symbolic value. We at IFAS want to devote every cent at our disposal to research and Extension focused on greening, and Mongi's entrepreneurial approach is an excellent example of that.

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Ultimately what Mongi has purchased with 17 years of experience, devotion to helping his customers and diligent continuing education is the trust of the growers he serves. So when growers have complaints or comments about IFAS — or even about other agencies and don't know where to turn — they call Mongi.

Mongi calls them, too. When IFAS and/or USDA faculty need a few trees on which to carry out a research experiment or test a product in Southwest Florida, Mongi often makes the request. "Growers don't say no to me, and I appreciate that," Mongi claims. Maybe that's because he doesn't say no himself. When Hamel needed to make a presentation to a Rotary club, he not only asked Mongi to help him prepare it, but he asked Mongi to attend as the onsite techie. Mongi obliged, and even fielded follow-up questions. That's the kind of thing that happens when the power of expertise is infused with a service ethic to improve the lives of Floridians.

Mongi's expertise is even helping to grow the industry in the face of greening. Martin Mason bought 40 acres in the LaBelle area three years ago. After consulting with Mongi, he planted seedless tangerines. Mason says that in addition to advising him directly and sending him daily e-mails with citrus news, Mongi has played a valuable role in bringing people together to share ideas on how to manage greening.

Even if you're not in one of Mongi's five counties, don't hesitate to contact him at (863) 674-4092 (office), (239) 595-5494 (mobile) or maz@ufl.edu. The Brazilians, Mexicans, Peruvians, French, Italians, Iranians, Indians, Turkish, Spanish, Moroccans, Egyptians, Saudis and Tunisians sure aren't bashful about it.

You can ask him anything under the sun. Just please don't push him to ask me for more resources. I have trouble saying no to Mongi, too.

Jack Payne is the University of Florida's senior vice president for agriculture and natural resources and leader of the Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences.