



Connecting with Cuba

By Jack Payne, jackpayne@ufl.edu, @JackPayneIFAS

I've been to Cuba twice in the past year, and I want more of my faculty — and more of you — to see it.

Growers have raised legitimate concerns about whether opening trade with Cuba will expose Florida farms to imported pests and disease. They also correctly point out that Cuban growers pose a greater potential competitive threat to farms in Florida than in any other state.

That's exactly why I plan to continue and strengthen the relationship between the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) and Cuban academics and scientists.

The thawing of relations between the two governments may be the first step down a road that could eventually present potential challenges for Florida agriculture. Of

course, UF/IFAS is in the business of addressing challenges and solving problems, or helping to turn them into opportunities.

ONGOING ENGAGEMENT

We didn't wait for the U.S. flag to be hoisted up on an embassy in Havana to pick up the pace of our engagement. UF/IFAS agricultural economists and engineers have been to Cuba on a number of research trips already this year. Several UF/IFAS nematologists traveled to Cuba, as did nematologists from the Florida Division of Plant Industries, to attend a nematology conference. In addition, UF/IFAS marine ecology and agronomy faculty led a group of students to Cuba this summer for a course studying the interrelationships between Cuba's agricultural

production in coastal areas and local marine and terrestrial ecosystems.

We have hosted multiple delegations of Cuban professors to campus and other UF/IFAS research facilities around the state. In the fall, we're bringing in two respected Cuban academics as guest faculty for a couple of years.

CITRUS GROWER TRIP

Steve Futch, well known as an Extension agent focused on citrus, is working to organize a tour of Cuba's citrus industry for Florida citrus growers this fall. The group will meet with scientists and government officials, tour groves and visit a juice processing plant.

The goal is a better understanding of the Cuban citrus industry. You should always understand your competitors in any business, and how you fit into the marketplace. We're visiting Cuba for the same reasons we visit Texas, California or Brazil.

RESEARCH COLLABORATION

What makes UF/IFAS so special when it comes to Cuba is that it is among the most respected of U.S.

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'OLL-8' Sweet Orange

(U.S. Patent Pending)

'OLL-8' fruit generally has high juice content and good pounds solids. Fruit holds on the tree exceptionally well, and maintains quality into the summer. Trees appear to yield better than standard 'Valencia'; the original 'OLL-8' tree yielded more than five 90 lb. boxes of fruit as an 8-year-old tree. 'OLL-8' has been the most precocious bearing clone among the OLL somaclones. 'OLL-8' produces fruit with internal and external color similar to that of 'Rhode Red'.

'OLL-4' Sweet Orange

(U.S. Patent Pending)

'OLL-4' produces fruit with exceptional juice content and soluble solids. Although minimal yield data is available, 'OLL-4' has been the highest yielding tree among the OLL selections. Fruit holds on the tree exceptionally well, and maintains quality into the summer. However, it matured earlier (and with better ratios) than standard 'Valencia' in 2014. 'OLL-4' produces fruit with excellent internal and external quality, juice flavor profiles, and juice color scores (higher than 'Rhode Red').

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academic institutions working there. That's not an accident. It's the result of more than 20 years of visits and collaborative research by our faculty.

It's easy enough to be the bridge to countries that have long been our friends. But after a half century of hostility, the United States has relatively few people who have firsthand information about Cuba — and even fewer who are trusted by Cubans. Through more than two decades of scientific research with Cuban colleagues, UF/IFAS has helped lead the way for other colleges and units at UF to work with and in Cuba. Together, our faculty members have solidified the reputation of UF in Cuba as being an institution interested in genuine, non-political research collaboration and exchanges of knowledge and information.

Political questions aside, UF/IFAS and Cuban agricultural economists and engineers, agronomists, entomologists, horticultural scientists, plant pathologists and others have lots of areas of potential research collaboration. Can we afford not to cooperate with anyone who's grappling with HLB? And even if Florida science and industry are not active in Cuba, those from Brazil and other countries certainly will be.

The UF/IFAS commitment to conduct collaborative research in Cuba demonstrates yet again our quest to search anywhere on the planet for solutions to citrus greening, no matter what the obstacles.

It also frees us to strengthen our status as a national leader in scientific collaboration with an international neighbor that is geographically closer to Florida than Gainesville is to Polk County. And Cuba has, by the way, considerable science capacity to help solve challenges it shares with Florida.

That science will help Florida citrus growers better compete in the days and years ahead. 🍊

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

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