



Proactive problem solver

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

Garima Kakkar doesn't wait for trouble. She goes looking for it. She was only three weeks into her job as a University of Florida/Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) citrus Extension agent when Hurricane Matthew hit Florida's Atlantic coast. She rolled to the groves, looking for fruit drop and any other damage she could document in case growers needed to make the case for disaster relief assistance.



Jack Payne and Garima Kakkar

It turned out there was no major damage in groves on Kakkar's turf in St. Lucie and Indian River counties. That frees her up to look for other problems.

If you have groves in her area, you've already received a survey from her asking what your needs are. She'll ask you in person if she sees you at the Florida Citrus Show at the St. Lucie County Fenn Center this month.

In addition to her strong academic credentials (master's and doctorate degrees from the UF/IFAS College of Agricultural and Life Sciences), two things made her a great candidate for the job on our citrus team. One is her history of looking for bad bugs and figuring out how to manage them.

The other is her fondness for working with growers.

As a student, Kakkar was on the team that first documented the seriousness of the threat that common blossom thrips posed to Florida's then \$125-million-a-year cucumber industry. In part because of the team's early detection and recommendations on how to monitor for thrip infestations, that threat has never been fully realized.

TROUBLE SEEKER

That's why Kakkar looks for problems. Because if she can find them when they're small, she can help you prevent them from becoming big.

Now she's tackling perhaps the biggest problem the industry has ever faced. Her zeal for looking ahead for problems will still serve you well, because behind the grand challenge of HLB are particular challenges in monitoring and controlling the psyllid.

Kakkar will be at the Citrus Show, at field days, at Extension office events and in your groves to help you see what she sees coming up — and to ask about the latest problems you're seeing. If you don't see her face-to-face, she welcomes your calls at 772-462-1660 or e-mails at garimaiari@ufl.edu.

UF/IFAS Extension has seven citrus agent positions located in the heart of the industry. They're dedicated to extending the latest information to growers fighting HLB.

Kakkar will also be doing worker safety training — everything from how to handle pesticides to how to operate a tractor safely.

BUG NERD

Kakkar has been a bug nerd going back to her childhood in India. At the playground, she'd follow ant trails to look for colonies, and she'd even erect tiny obstacles to see how the ants would react.

She came to the United States to study at UF, and her education included working for Nan-Yao Su, inventor of the Sentricon® termite system.

Kakkar then moved on to thrips. Now, she's focusing her bug fascination on psyllids. She's also enthusiastic about getting to know growers anywhere in Florida she can help out, not just in her two counties.

She's a quick study and has learned that Florida citrus growers are both open-minded in embracing innovation and determined in wanting to continue to apply that innovation to citrus more than to alternative crops. These traits will likely play a part in the salvation of the industry that has proven to be resilient in the face of freezes, canker and market challenges.

Please contact Kakkar or any of our citrus agents to get connected to the science that will help you get through the HLB era. 🍊

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.