



Youth give hope for the future of Florida citrus

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

Steven Lommerse is an 18-year-old who reads the labels of OJ cartons to make sure what he's drinking is from Florida. He whips out his iPhone to show off Instagram photos of his own citrus trees.

I met Lommerse because he's president of the Florida 4-H Council. He's the lead voice for more than 200,000 Floridian kids. He's also a great example of why there's a future for Florida citrus.

Lommerse and I visited with each other at a recent 4-H fundraiser in Gainesville. He came up from Seminole County with a single container holding a young Persian lime tree in it. He placed it in the dining hall as if planting a flag.

He was putting down a marker to tell attendees that there are people his age who believe in citrus. When he spoke, he talked about prospects for a genetically modified, HLB-resistant rootstock.

What made me believe in his vision of the future, though, was his motivation. Lommerse doesn't grow trees for the money.

He simply says he loves growing citrus trees. His heart, not his head, will keep him connected to citrus for years to come, even if he doesn't make his living off it. He's devoted to citrus because it runs in the family. Because there's no way he wouldn't be a citrus kid.

Lommerse is good enough at it that he's a three-time grand champion in the 4-H District 8 citrus-growing competition.



Steven Lommerse and Jack Payne met at a recent 4-H fundraiser.

GROWING CONFIDENCE

He'll have to make a living, of course, and he'll pursue an agricultural business degree next year on his mom's advice. He has also become adept at pre-selling his trees by calling industry professionals and asking them to sponsor his projects.

Lommerse knows how things can change. He's experienced it himself. He joined 4-H as a 7-year-old, but only because his mom made him. And the first time he gave a public presentation as a 4-Her, he hid behind the lectern, terrified to face an audience.

Today, he can confidently lead a discussion about parliamentary procedure among dozens of 4-Hers. Each year, he becomes more confident in placing calls to folks like Bill Lennon and Mark Pell to ask them to sponsor his project. Lommerse wears the green 4-H blazer and looks parents, legislators and university administrators in the eye, unfailingly calls them "sir" and "ma'am" and shakes hands like he means it.

If a cowering second-grader can grow into the voice of legions, Lommerse's experience has taught him a centuries-old tradition can survive the latest devastating disease.

4-H FUNDING

In this space, you'll often read about the necessity of funding public science. I see 4-H as part of that. It promotes citrus and other agricultural commodities to the next generation of professionals. It gives those up-and-comers a chance to develop into not just professionals, but leaders.

Last year, \$1 million in University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences Extension funding that helps pay for 4-H was vetoed. One of our top priorities for 2018 is to restore that funding. After all, we want to continue molding as many Steven Lommerses as we can. 🍊

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