



Growers have questions; IFAS has answers

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

For years now, this column has been a monologue. It's been informed by growers and packers, but it's always been from my keyboard to your eyes. At the suggestion of AgNet Media Vice President Robin Loftin, this month I'm dedicating this space to answering questions of interest to the Florida citrus industry. The following questions represent my feel for what's on your mind. However, please contact me with your specific questions so I can address them in a coming issue.

Q: When will you have grove-ready solutions for HLB that lower my production costs enough to stay competitive?

A: It's the industry consensus that there's no silver bullet for HLB. But I would argue that the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) is well on the way to producing silver buckshot. While no one breakthrough has stopped HLB in its tracks, our progress on irrigation, nutrients, root health and psyllid control has combined to keep many groves viable. Although we have no "cure," our science is giving your trees longer, more productive lives.

Q: What do you consider the most promising recent advances in HLB science?

A: There are several:

- Identifying impacts of the bacteria on tree root systems, which helped shape tree health recommendations
- Better recommendations on what kind and how many nutrients to apply to maintain productivity

- Recent advances in psyllid management that make psyllid control more cost effective

Q: Where does UF/IFAS get the money for citrus research?

A: The biggest chunk comes from the share UF/IFAS earns of the farm bill's five-year, \$125 million for HLB research. We also get funding from the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. Florida citrus growers have played a key role in obtaining funding to support the research done by UF/IFAS that directly benefits the Florida citrus industry.

In addition, UF/IFAS makes a huge investment from its base budget, directing the focus of scores of its researchers, not just those at the Citrus Research and Education Center, to addressing HLB.

Q: Can I get newly developed UF/IFAS citrus trees?

A: Yes. UF/IFAS has made several new citrus cultivars available under its Fast Track release program. This option will remain in effect until at least July 2021. Fast Track cultivars show promise, but

we don't have enough data to evaluate whether they will be successful in your grove. The idea is to get new varieties out to growers for evaluation and commercialization. UF/IFAS has licensed the varieties to nurseries, where the trees are available for purchase by commercial citrus growers.

From time to time, opportunities exist for growers to collaborate with UF/IFAS citrus breeders in trialing unreleased, highly experimental citrus selections under a material transfer agreement. This partnership with growers is especially important to our success.



Growing citrus under protective screen is one method to prevent HLB.

Q: What's your take on growing trees under protective screens?

A: It's intriguing to me as an elegant and simple solution. Intuitively, you'd think that if you can screen out your carriers, you wouldn't catch the disease. Of course, it's not quite that simple. Screens are costly. Screens appear to work great for fresh fruit varieties such as grapefruit and Murcotts but are not as cost effective for vast acreage of juice oranges. It's like many UF/IFAS HLB advancements — useful in some instances but not a one-size-fits-all strategy. 🍊

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Ask Jack

Send your citrus-specific questions to the author of this column, Jack Payne, at jackpayne@ufl.edu. Be sure to copy chrismoran@ufl.edu and tacy@agnetmedia.com on the email.