



Trees to tell Florida's citrus story

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Where we tell the story of citrus matters as much as what we tell. Your audience is not visiting your groves. It's in the cities and near the beach.

Tammy Hall, marketing director at CFS Roofing, and Jim Gravley, director of citrus operations for Old Florida Citrus, are taking the grove to the audience. Early this year, they had 50 trees planted at a Fort Myers site that gets 300,000 visitors annually. Now the trees can do the talking at the Edison & Ford Winter Estates Citrus Project.

The story they'll tell, through brochures, guided tours, audio tours and special programs, is one of an enterprise based on innovation at a shrine to two of America's most celebrated innovators. It's a story of success based on science.

For more than a century, that science has come from the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS). Hall and Gravley are working with Kelly Morgan, director of the UF/IFAS Southwest Florida Research and Education Center in Immokalee.

EDUCATING URBANITES

Morgan recognized immediately upon becoming the center's leader in August that his audience — beyond growers — is on the coast. Hall and Gravley's work presents an opportunity. It will be the job of Morgan and his faculty at the center to make the trees talk, to tell their story to city dwellers and tourists.

Morgan and his staff will help shape classes, presentations and lectures centered on the grove. Their research and knowledge will go into materials that explain how 50 trees represent a centuries-old enterprise, a multibillion-dollar-a-year industry that employs hundreds of thousands of Floridians, and the commitment of the modern grower to caring for the land that provides his or her livelihood.

At Edison/Ford, Morgan sees opportunity to show urban audiences how smart irrigation systems save water. He hopes to show visitors how judicious use of fertilizer reduces the amount of nutrients that ends up in waterways. He wants to demonstrate that pest management doesn't always mean spraying insecticides.

The 50 arboreal ambassadors will arguably become the most high-profile

of the state's 50-million-plus citrus trees. Gravley has taken on an important job as their caretaker, and he'll keep Morgan on speed dial for consultation.

Hall wants the Hamlins, Valencias, Navels, lemons, and grapefruit trees to testify to a history that's alive today and sets Southwest Florida apart from Tampa, Orlando or Miami.

AGRICULTURAL ATTRACTION

Hall believes that emphasizing the only-in-Southwest-Florida vibe will attract visitors. To that end, she recruited the Lee County Visitor & Convention Bureau and Lee County Port Authority as partners in the citrus project. And to assure industry buy-in, she secured the support of Southern Gardens Citrus, the Florida Department of Citrus and the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.

Success at Edison/Ford could anchor a nascent local agritourism movement. An alliance of the estates with those who host farm-to-table meals, farm tours, barn weddings, u-pick operations, school groups and other agriculture-themed experiences could make a powerful agritourist magnet.

Hall, Gravley and Morgan also want to tell students about agriculture as an exciting career field, one that employs scientists, business people, public policy experts, finance professionals and marketers. People who are exposed to real agriculture will have more informed views on land use, public policy and the locations of farms. Orange juice tastings aim to inspire visitors to reach for Florida OJ when the vacation's over.

The grove will tell 300,000 people a year that citrus has a future in Florida. Hall, Gravley and Morgan are starting with 50 good reasons that consumers, aspiring professionals, elected and appointed officials, university academics and families should support that future. 🍊

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Individual protective covers help keep psyllids off newly planted trees at the Edison & Ford Winter Estates Citrus Project.