



# Wanted: State support for scientists

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

A great citrus scientist must first be a great scientist. We seek the best agricultural scientists when we post a job with the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS). Then we talk to our recruits about what they'll work on. Everyone joining us in Lake Alfred and most in Fort Pierce and Immokalee know they'll be working on HLB. The scope of the threat is actually a selling point to these emerging experts eager to make an impact. The University of Florida can only put out the help wanted sign in the first place if we're funded by the state Legislature. That means UF/IFAS needs the support of the industry to make the case that the need for more scientific expertise is acute. Even after more than a decade of what I consider the citrus version of the Manhattan Project, we can still use more expertise. If the state Legislature grants the current UF/IFAS funding request, we can continue to hire exciting young talent such as Sandra Guzmán, Ozgur Batuman and Lauren Diepenbrock.

## SANDRA GUZMÁN

Guzmán started at the Indian River Research and Education Center in Fort Pierce in November. She aims to use artificial intelligence to help restore Indian River grapefruit to its glory. She'll study machine learning that helps to translate huge amounts of data and makes it easy enough to digest that growers can use it to manage irrigation.



Guzmán

Our scientists have discovered that trees infected with HLB have special water needs. Guzmán will advance our understanding of how we can use that to our advantage.

## OZGUR BATUMAN

Batuman began in 2016 to add to our inquiry into whether we could freight the psyllid with a virus that alters its genes so it can no longer



Batuman

spread HLB. In his lab at the Southwest Florida Research and Education Center in Immokalee, he's been pondering whether a virus might carry instructions, for example, that alter a psyllid's genes so that it can no longer fly. Or it might deliver code that says not to carry HLB bacterium but to digest it.

## LAUREN DIEPENBROCK

Even the world's top-ranked entomology department can use another hand in insect ecology. Lauren Diepenbrock started at the Citrus Research and Education Center in Lake Alfred last year. She's applying for



Diepenbrock

funding that will enable her to examine options for managing the psyllid with the least impact on other bugs, plants and animals.

## INDUSTRY VOICE IS ESSENTIAL

Again, it's important to note that first we need the ability to go out and look for a new scientist. That's why we're asking for an increase in funding. It's not a citrus ask, but the model is we hire people to work on the most pressing problems. HLB is on everyone's short list.

Without that state support, the science you depend on is vulnerable to budget shortfalls. That leads to hiring freezes, delayed candidate searches and the inability to counteroffer to faculty who get recruited by other universities. In other words, overall funding for UF/IFAS is essential for us to maintain the level of attention we give citrus.

We could only assemble the talent we have because of past support from the state Legislature, which we got because of past support from you.

Industry members are the most convincing educators on this matter,

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so tell your lawmakers what UF/IFAS science means to you.

Please heed any call you hear from Mike Sparks, Larry Black, Ray Royce, Steve Smith and other citrus leaders. Industry input, government support and university knowledge are how the land-grant system works. It's served us since the Civil War. It's what will help us get through the current crisis. 🍊

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