



New citrus agent following in mentors' footsteps

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

Soon enough, Ajia Paolillo will get to the specific tasks required for supporting your operations. In her first months as a University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) Extension multi-county citrus agent, though, she wants to show you how much she loves the industry and how much she wants to help growers.



Paolillo

I got to meet Paolillo in DeSoto County on her first day of work on Jan. 31. What impressed me was that she leads with how much she cares before she gets to what she knows. That's what I expect of a good Extension agent.

CITRUS CREDENTIALS

Sometimes we at UF/IFAS hire faculty whose past work was in other commodities, and we turn them into citrus scientists. They, too, learn to care deeply about citrus and the people who produce it. Paolillo doesn't have to learn that part. She starts with a devotion to citrus. That bodes well for her future success — and yours.

She walked in her master's degree ceremony (in agricultural education and communication with a specialization in Extension, from the UF/IFAS College of Agricultural and Life

Sciences) with the words, "Eat Florida Citrus!" on her mortarboard. Her non-thesis project was to help build an exotic citrus diseases website.

She previously earned her citrus business degree at Florida Southern College. Her formal education gave her the scientific background she'll need to help you.

INFLUENCERS AND INSTRUCTORS

Her inspiration, though, has come from mentors who are now her colleagues. She counts meeting her predecessor, Stephen Futch, as a major influence in identifying Extension as her career path.

Citrus Hall of Famer and retired UF/IFAS Extension citrus agent Tim Hurner was one of her favorite undergraduate instructors. She has also learned from Hurner's daughter, Highlands County citrus agent Laurie Hurner, and from multi-county citrus agent Chris Oswald.

For 20 years, she's been accruing citrus knowledge, going from summer intern to lab tech to Extension assistant at the Citrus Research and Education Center (CREC). That included work under the tutelage of Bill Castle, another major influence in both her academic grounding and chosen career path.

As an Extension assistant, she worked the floor at the Citrus Expo and the Florida Citrus Show. Those opportunities to meet some of you put

her squarely into the citrus camp as she contemplated a career.

Nearly two decades after meeting Futch — and still awed by his breadth of knowledge — she succeeds him as the citrus agent for DeSoto, Hardee and Manatee counties. So, she understands that at first, she may be known as the new Steve Futch.

AIMING FOR ACCESSIBILITY

She hopes to introduce herself to you with a handshake instead of an email. That Paolillo was with me and an agribusiness group on her first day of work — instead of getting keys, an email account and a parking space — demonstrates that she knows Extension can't all be done at a desk.

Her main office will be in Arcadia. She'll also have workspace in Palmetto and Wauchula. Her most important worksite will be the groves.

Paolillo expects to arrange grove visits very soon with area growers. She also expects she'll be calling Lake Alfred frequently to consult with faculty to get answers to your questions. That's professionalism, plain and simple, the nuts and bolts of an agent's duties.

But caring, that's hard to teach. Paolillo has her eyes wide open about the challenges of the industry, and she's still all in. She says just seeing a truck full of fruit makes her happy. We can always use one more of that kind of person in our industry.

Through her degree programs, her experience at CREC, and two years as a citrus nursery inspector for the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, she has learned the business. She knows how to effectively present research data, how to manage pests, diseases and greenhouses, and how the citrus budwood program works.

What she needs to learn is what you need — so she can deliver it. Please invite her to come see you. Call her cell at 863-251-4763 or email her at ajiacunningham@ufl.edu. 🍊

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.