



By Laurie Hurner

The Florida citrus industry: Then and now



Oh, the heat of a Florida summer. I keep wondering why it is so hot for March. Yes, I said March. It seems like we have been living in a bubble during this pandemic, and time seems to be standing still.

Growers usually spend the summer traveling the country or at least hitting the Florida beaches. Not much of that seemed to go on this summer. The fear of coronavirus at times has been overwhelming.

As we move back into fall, the normal routine may not be so normal. However, the normal questions are being asked on the streets. When will plants open? Will there be a cash market? Who has a contract?

Looking over my lifetime career of serving the Florida citrus industry in some way, I cannot help but wonder what the future holds. As I talked with growers this summer, it seemed they were nostalgic for pre-greening days (if they can remember that far back).



THE CITRUS MEMORIES

I spoke to a couple of citrus growers from Highlands County recently who, shall we say, have been around the block a time or two. As usual, the topic of greening came up.

I really sat and listened as they reminisced about citrus industry issues past. The time that helicopters landed at the ag center full of reporters wanting to talk about something rumored to be like cancer for oranges. (Canker is what the reporters were looking for, but they had been misinformed). The days of watching nematodes run rampant across groves and appearing to destroy acres overnight. The freezes of the 1980s.

They talked about their friends from North Florida and how bad they felt as they watched their citrus industry simply fade away in a decade. I watched these men talk about my dad (Tim Hurner) and other Extension agents like John Jackson and Tom Oswalt who had worked with them through thick and thin, in days when the internet was not yet a thing, and a phone was a box on your desk. These folks were the real educators, the real “extensions” of the University of Florida.

THE LONG HAUL

As we finished up our conversation, we all decided that we are not sure where greening will leave us, but that we are all in this for the long haul and thank the good Lord many of our friends are as well.

The University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences Extension (UF/IFAS) citrus team is alive and well today. I do not want my

prior comment in any way to put down what Chris Oswalt, Ajia Paolillo, Mongi Zekri, Amir Rezazadeh or Juanita Popenoe are doing. They are working hard to help the Florida citrus growers while times are changing.

Right now, there are no grower meetings with barbecues, no field days and no fruit-tasting events. Heck, we didn’t even have Citrus Expo in person. That does not mean citrus Extension days are over. This team is working hard to bring you online continuing education units, online programming and dissemination of the latest research as soon as it is available.

THE NEXT CHAPTER

I have been honored to be a part of this team for over seven years. By the time this article runs, I will have moved on to my new job and career. I will be bringing citrus, agriculture and Extension to my new job as the Highlands County assistant county administrator.

It has been my honor to serve the Florida citrus grower in my role as a UF/IFAS Extension citrus agent, and I will take all of you with me into my new job. I want to thank you for your friendship, your support and your belief in Florida citrus Extension. 🍊

Laurie Hurner, formerly UF/IFAS Highlands County Extension director and a citrus agent, is now Highlands County assistant county administrator.