



Bridge builder at helm of horticultural sciences

By J. Scott Angle, jangle@ufl.edu, @IFAS_VP

At first, you might think of Chris Gunter as Christopher Vincent or Johnny Ferrarezi's new boss. Maybe you remember him through work he's done with the Citrus Research and Education Center's (CREC) Michelle Danyluk on produce safety.

What you'll soon learn about the new chair of the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) Department of Horticultural Sciences is that he is laser-focused on serving growers.

HIGHLY REGARDED

Gunter started as chair in June. It was an easy choice, in part because a panel of stakeholders who interviewed Gunter that was led by Mike Aerts of the Florida Fruit & Vegetable Association reported to me: "We recommend highly and without reservation."

Peter Chaires of Florida Citrus Packers and New Varieties Development and Management Corp. also served on the stakeholder panel and confirms the rave review. He calls Gunter enthusiastic, humble, honest and forthright, a great communicator and a solid thinker.

Gunter impressed Chaires and me with his pledge to bridge the distance between Gainesville and the research and education centers. Gunter has worked from a main campus serving stakeholders through research and Extension.

He understands that some of the most important work for some commodities occurs away from Gainesville.



Photo by Steven Sargent, UF/IFAS

Left to right: University of Florida's Jose Chaparro, horticultural sciences associate professor; Chris Gunter, chair of the Department of Horticultural Sciences; and Zack Black, farm manager.

In horticultural sciences, that could include Fernando Alferez's individual protective covers in Immokalee, Johnny Ferrarezi's Millennium Block in Fort Pierce or Tripti Vashisth's nutrition program in Lake Alfred.

RESOURCES AND ALLIANCES

A chair's job is to deliver resources to the faculty in his charge. Gunter sees three places to hunt. First, he'll help me secure UF/IFAS's share of the resources UF is investing in artificial intelligence. He'll also look on campus to partner with other departments. He's particularly interested in pairing his horticulturalists with engineers.

Gunter also sees great potential in off-campus alliances, namely with Florida's high-tech sector. He plans to connect faculty and students to the

sector to enhance research and job opportunities. He also envisions connecting startups with faculty members working in the same field to boost the department's programs.

Gunter has deep roots in Extension, having served the past 20 years as a vegetable crop specialist.

We know that horticultural practices can make a big difference in citrus production, especially in the age of HLB. The search for this chair is an example of how we can't always do things as quickly as we want because doing them right takes time. While we searched for Gunter, the department was led well by outgoing interim chair Jackie Burns, the former director of CREC and dean for research.

DEPARTMENT ENHANCEMENTS

In fact, I'm not sure how to improve your horticultural sciences team's top-10-in-the-world ranking. My first major hire as vice president is going to help figure it out.

Gunter inherits a department that even with its high ranking is still on the rise. Just this year, we built a new on-campus greenhouse for our horticulturalists and cut the ribbon on 15 new growth chambers they will share with several other departments.

The new research and teaching grove has a new lab, a three-bay psyllid-proof quarantine greenhouse for citrus, equipment shed and pole barn, not to mention a go-getter farm manager. Zack Black has quickly proven adept at preventing rather than reacting to problems.

OUTREACH ENCOURAGED

Like me, Gunter is committed to getting out of Gainesville and going to where the stakeholders are. Please invite Gunter — and me — to your grove. I, too, am still in my first year at UF/IFAS and look forward to meeting many more of you.

You can reach out directly to me at jangle@ufl.edu, to Gunter at cc.gunter@ufl.edu, to your Extension agent or to any member of the Department of Horticultural Sciences. 🍊

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