UF/IFAS CITRUS STATE

Changing fertilization habits

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We've learned (or relearned) at least two major things about HLB in the past decade: Proper nutrition is one of the most effective tools we have against the disease, and what works in another grove doesn't necessarily work in yours.

There may be as many solutions for addressing HLB as there are groves. Everyone has different soils, weather, irrigation systems, tree ages, varieties and more. There's no one-size-fits-all prescription to keep your trees healthy.

TEACHING YOU TO FISH

That's why we launched the nutrition box initiative more than a year ago. On the surface, it looks like we're catching a fish to feed you this year. We'll test your soil and leaf samples for free and recommend exactly how, when and what to feed your trees.

But really, we're teaching you to fish so you can feed yourself. The goal is to change to more frequent fertilization and testing than you used to do. It's long-term change we're after in the industry. If the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) has to invest some money in that up front, we're good with that.

Seventy of you participated in the first year of the program. Every week, our team of assistant professors Tripti Vashisth and Davie Kadyampakeni, citrus agents Chris Oswalt, Ajia Paolillo, Juanita Popenoe, Amir Rezazadeh and Mongi Zekri, and Extension coordinator Jamie Burrow met to review your samples. They discussed solutions and delivered a customized report with precise fertilization recommendations for your grove only.

PROGRAM EXPANSION

As we enter year two, we invited more growers to participate. Vashisth says this extends the benefits of free sampling to more of the industry while giving citrus scientists a larger data set for investigating what works where for Florida citrus.

This expansion will allow UF/IFAS scientists to discover more about things like micronutrients, not just potassium and nitrogen. Small differences in the amounts of boron, manganese, iron and zinc can have huge effects on tree health that will lead to increased yield and better fruit quality.

I'm not going to oversell here. It's too early to show a difference in yield. But like everything we do, the ultimate goal is to increase the size and quality of your harvest.

The main thing is, we want to help you develop new habits in the way you fertilize. Change like this can cost money and time up front for a payoff down the road.

PROACTIVE APPROACH

Vashisth looks at it like this. Her grandparents went to the doctor only when they were ill or injured. But she and her generation go for annual checkups to detect health problems early when they can be treated easily or even prevented.

Similarly, you can't afford to wait until things go wrong. Citrus growers, Vashisth says, don't have the margin for error they had in the pre-HLB era when trees grew and produced even with a less-than-ideal nutrition program.

Times change, so habits have to as well. If we see more of you going to more frequent fertilization schedules, increasing the frequency of your soil and leaf testing, and making your own adjustments without a prescription from a scientist at the Citrus Research and Education Center, we'll consider the nutrition box program a success.

Vashisth and her contemporaries are the latest generation of scientists to look at their work this way. This is an outlook they share with the late Gene Albrigo, Bob Koo and even John Jeffries from your great-great-grandfather's day more than a century ago.

We've always measured the success of our science one grove at a time. That ethic is more important than ever now that HLB has necessitated one-grove-at-a-time solutions.

Florida citrus growers can take advantage of the nutrition box program to get customized fertilizer recommendations for their groves.

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