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Peter Chaires (left) played a key role in opening the new Alpha Gamma Rho house on the University of Florida campus.

A citrus servant

It's not unusual for the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) to have a dozen contacts with Peter Chaires in a day, between the emails, calls and visits.

Chaires serves as executive director of the New Varieties Development & Management Corp. (NVDMC), executive vice president of Florida Citrus Packers and manager of the Citrus Administrative Committee.

He offers full-time feedback. We listen to the voice of industry as often as you can deliver it, but Chaires is perhaps the most consistently vocal. Part of that is his professional roles that put him in the UF/IFAS orbit. But another part is Chaires, a fourth-generation Gator, giving to a university he loves.

INDUSTRY ENGAGEMENT

Among the many things the pandemic interrupted were in-person gatherings to get feedback on fruit. You can't tell how juicy an orange is on Zoom. You taste Brix in bites, not bytes. There's no evaluating how easy it is to peel a mandarin you're seeing only in an email.

Chaires did as much as anyone to ensure that the citrus industry talked

to us across the pandemic divide. With display days on hold, Chaires arranged for industry participants to visit the Citrus Research and Education Center in Lake Alfred to pick up samples and submit feedback online. Even during normal times, Chaires sometimes picks up and delivers samples himself to get industry members' feedback between display days.

Now that we're mostly back to in-person fruit/juice displays, Chaires is back to organizing them in Lake Alfred, Fort Pierce and Gainesville. He has extensive connections to attract an array of attendees — growers, salespeople, packers and nursery operators.

Jude Grosser, a UF/IFAS citrus breeder who considers Chaires a personal friend as well as colleague, says he recently received an email from Chaires announcing a forum to discuss production issues with Sugar Belle®. That call for conversation aims to identify practices to reliably produce quality, marketable fruit, informing producer and professor alike.

This proactive outreach is more important than ever because more science is applied in the grove than ever.

As the head of the NVDMC,

Chaires is at the center of the search for HLB-tolerant trees. As he mentioned during a recent All In For Citrus podcast, there are tens of thousands of potential cultivars in the pipeline. While we have world-class scientists and tech tools to sift through them, we need industry to help us figure out where to look hardest to identify the most promising candidates.

UF/IFAS SERVICE

Chaires, an eternal optimist, continually shows that he believes in the future of Florida citrus and that UF/IFAS is a key to that future. He volunteers as leader of the Alpha Gamma Rho (AGR) UF chapter and was in charge of fundraising to build a new house. Chaires recently presided over a ribbon-cutting ceremony to formally open the new house. After years of being scattered across campus, AGR's brothers seeking careers in citrus and Florida agriculture are now together.

With that mission accomplished, Chaires is about to step down from his AGR position, only to fill the time with other service to UF/IFAS. He plans to dedicate more time and effort to the UF/IFAS SHARE Council, helping raise money and increase engagement among research, Extension and education.

I consider Chaires, an alumnus of the Wedgworth Leadership Institute for Agriculture and Natural Resources, a citrus servant leader. He helps UF/IFAS get the most out of what it has, whether that's our students, our breeders, our development team or our administration.

I'm not the only one influenced by his loyalty to UF/IFAS. Late last year, his son Jacob became a fifth-generation Gator, graduating from the UF/IFAS College of Agricultural and Life Sciences with a degree in environmental management of agriculture and natural resources.

Chaires came home from the hospital as a newborn swaddled in orange and blue, he jokes. Both the industry and UF/IFAS benefit tremendously from his lifelong connection with his alma mater. 🍊

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