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Chris Oswald helped Danielle Sprague realize she wanted to become a citrus agent.

Oswalt earns Extension Mentor of the Year award

Of all the things Chris Oswald has delivered for the citrus industry — weather data, freeze-protection advice, Extension programming — his most valuable contribution might be his mentorship of a new generation of citrus agents.

GUIDING CAREERS

You likely wouldn't have Danielle Sprague assisting a cold-hardy citrus association in North Florida were it not for Oswald. Eight years ago, as a student trying to find her way, she cold-called Oswald on the recommendation of her academic adviser.

Soon she was visiting with him weekly, watching him work to solve growers' problems. She learned what an Extension agent does from Oswald. He taught her what she had to do to become one. The most important thing she learned, though, was that she wanted to be one.

Ajia Paolillo found Oswald the year after Sprague did. Paolillo was a

University of Florida (UF) graduate student looking for a conversation about Extension careers. Oswald invited her to his office and talked to her about her potential career path, and she began working in the citrus Extension program at the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) Citrus Research and Education Center (CREC). She still works with Oswald frequently in her job as the agent for DeSoto, Hardee and Manatee counties.

BUILDING A TEAM

Brandon White recalls when he started as an agent for Orange and Lake counties, he reached out to CREC for a tour. Oswald took it upon himself to make White's visit a team-building exercise, gathering the newer citrus agents for a lunch and conversation about how to be a great agent.

FINDING ANSWERS

Amir Rezazadeh, the agent for St. Lucie and Indian River counties, says

that when an agent has a question but no answer, he or she poses it to the team in an email. Oswald knows or finds out the answers the most frequently.

Ideally, I'd hire citrus agents before their predecessors depart. After all, we at UF/IFAS share with the citrus industry and all of Florida agriculture the challenge of finding and training successors.

In my ideal world, a new agent would have an opportunity to learn nuances of the job from someone who's been doing it. But as anyone whose business relies on people (isn't that most of us?) knows, it's not so quick and easy to find, vet and hire new talent.

So, our newcomers turn to Oswald. He doesn't seek to be a mentor, but that's what Sprague, Paolillo and Jamie Burrow call him in their nomination letters that earned him the UF/IFAS Extension Mentor of the Year award in September.

SHARING LESSONS LEARNED

Oswald sees the value of a UF degree. In fact, he has two. He also believes that if new agents see value in his 25 years as a citrus agent, he's glad to share lessons learned, who to call, how to assemble an advisory board, the elements of a useful newsletter, which professional associations to join and how to demonstrate a service ethic.

Burrow wrote in her letter that Oswald models "a desire to guide others to become the best in their day-to-day job responsibilities and to enjoy the journey."

Our agents' best mentors are you in the grove. But there are some things they have to learn from an agent's perspective. Oswald learned from Jack Hebb, John Jackson and other agents whom readers of a certain age will remember.

For most of the past 50 years, there's been a citrus agent named Oswald in the Polk County area. Thomas, Chris' father, retired from a 36-year career in 1999.

Unless your grove is in Hillsborough or Polk counties, Oswald is not officially your agent. But no matter where you grow citrus, Oswald has probably helped you do a better job because he's helped your local citrus agent do a better job. 🍊

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