Oswalt earns Extension Mentor of the Year award

Of all the things Chris Oswalt 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 Oswalt. Eight years ago, as a student trying to find her way, she cold-called Oswalt 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 Oswalt. 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 Oswalt the year after Sprague did. Paolillo was a University of Florida (UF) graduate student looking for a conversation about Extension careers. Oswalt 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 Oswalt 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. Oswalt 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. Oswalt 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 Oswalt. 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
Oswalt 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, how 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 Oswalt 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. Oswalt 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 Oswalt 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, Oswalt is not officially your agent. But no matter where you grow citrus, Oswalt has probably helped you do a better job because he’s helped your local citrus agent do a better job.

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