



By Ajia Paolillo

There is no crystal ball

There is no crystal ball when it comes to anything in life, including agriculture. Growers are at the mercy of Mother Nature's glory and fury.

Over time, the citrus industry has developed production techniques and practices to help during the hard times. Microsprinkler irrigation is used both to provide targeted, much needed water during bloom, fruit set and dry conditions, as well as to protect trees from the frigid cold. Nutritional

products, including controlled-release fertilizer, liquid formulations and foliar sprays, have allowed growers to provide trees with a steady source of nutrients for longer periods throughout the year and the ability to adjust those rates as needed. Researchers have provided more precise spray schedules to effectively control many of the pests, diseases

and weeds that are found in the grove. However, the Florida citrus industry continues to face challenging times.

HURRICANE HINDRANCES

Freezes and hurricanes in 2022 caused widespread damage, and growers continued to feel the effects of HLB in both tree health and yield loss. Last year, I was hopeful that some of the practices growers were implementing were starting to yield better results.

Some growers were able to begin the gibberellic acid (GA) application schedule recommended by Tripti Vashisth, associate professor at the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) Citrus Research and Education Center. Unfortunately, Hurricane Ian hit at the

beginning of that schedule, making it difficult for growers to continue to apply the monthly applications. For those that were able to deliver at least one more application before the end of December/beginning of January, I am looking forward to hearing what the effects look like. Although the GA applications are just one of the tools growers can use, I have seen and heard positive results so far. I am hopeful that growers can continue to follow this practice and see improved tree health and yield.

The damage from Hurricane Ian is still hindering some growers from reaching parts of their groves. This is due to fallen trees or major washouts of access roads.

Through my field visits and conversations with growers, one concern that kept coming up was how to handle the thousands of trees that are leaning over. Some trees have over half their root system exposed. Once the fruit is harvested, those trees will be pushed out. Some trees are leaned over just enough to make driving down the row middle, spraying and weed management difficult.

I have heard mixed results from trees that were put upright after Hurricane Irma versus trees that were left to grow in that position. Growers, what are your particular results? Did Hurricane Irma influence how you handled leaning trees from Hurricane Ian? Did you see any differences in rootstocks and tree age with this type of damage?

CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

It has been said over and over that citrus growers are resilient. Growers are resilient, and they love what they do. I know growers will continue to fight for the industry we all rely on. As we move forward in the new year, I would love to hear from growers. What is working for you and what is not? Which practices can we build on, and which scion/rootstock combinations work well in the field?

This year, I would like to have those conversations with and between growers on what is working despite the challenges they face. There is no crystal ball, but what pieces of the puzzle can we put together to make our industry strong again? 🍊

Ajia Paolillo is a UF/IFAS multi-county citrus agent based in Arcadia.