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Supporting citrus science

Let's start with the most important thing. Citrus science remains a top priority of the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS).

Citrus is special. My goal for citrus is sustainability. That means profitability.

Here are a few new ways UF/IFAS has demonstrated its support for citrus science during the past five years while I served as UF/IFAS research dean before I became interim senior vice president.

THE MILLENNIUM BLOCK

The research administrative team supported the planting of more than 5,000 trees in the 20-acre Millennium

Block grove at the Indian River Research and Education Center. The goal is to identify which rootstocks and varieties might tolerate HLB with high yield and fruit quality.



John Chater

JOHN CHATER

We long needed someone to evaluate the new citrus varieties coming out of our breeding program. I understood this because I was essentially the John Chater of sugarcane early in my career at UF/IFAS as a researcher at the Everglades Research and Education Center in Belle Glade. I pushed for the creation of a position to evaluate new citrus variety candidates.

THE CROP TRANSFORMATION CENTER

We've long regarded biotech as a booster for breeding. Concerns about consumer acceptance sometimes made industry hesitant about the use of gene editing to develop superior varieties. As industry began to ask us about biotech solutions, though, I worked with former senior vice president (and now provost) Scott Angle to launch the Crop Transformation Center to support using tools like CRISPR on the HLB problem. The innovation got the support of University of Florida

President Ben Sasse.

The center will eventually work on many commodities, but we launched it with citrus in mind and as its first target crop.

FORGING CITRUS RELATIONSHIPS

In my short time as leader of UF/IFAS, I've perhaps had more contact with Florida Citrus Mutual Chief Executive Officer Matt Joyner than with any other commodity association leader. He's a valuable source of counsel and quickly becoming a friend.

As soon as I could appoint John Davis to take over as interim dean of UF/IFAS research and I was free to do one job, I started putting citrus people on my calendar. This included research leaders like Rick Dantzler, growers and emerging leaders like Christian Spinoso, and agency officials like Steve Smith.

I want to get you on my calendar, too. Please invite me to come meet you, visit your groves, see the conditions in the field, hear your stories and understand your needs.

Meanwhile, you'll be on my mind. It'll happen at least once a day when I drink my glass of Florida orange juice! But it will also happen when I pick an orange or grapefruit off trees in my yard.

The work we do together is about supporting your livelihoods. It's about keeping Florida green amidst its population surge. It's about ensuring your grandchildren enjoy a piece of "old" Florida, supported by modern technology and future senior vice presidents who share my commitment to citrus. 🍊

Rob Gilbert is the University of Florida's interim senior vice president for agriculture and natural resources and leader of UF/IFAS.

