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# Positive changes

**T**wo and a half years ago, Riley McKenna leveled with his dad. Without a tool that made a noticeable difference in the grove soon, it might be time for dad to retire and Riley to seek a new career.

So why was he spending an April day with me and his cousin Morgan McKenna Porter, still in the business, still proudly showing visitors a grove in Lake Wales?

"What happened was what I was asking for — something changed the way these trees act," Riley said.

## APPLYING THE SCIENCE

It was a lot of things, but the biggest for the McKennas has been oxytetracycline (OTC) injection, based on proof of concept demonstrated by University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) scientists. But it's certainly no panacea.

The family grove also got a nutrition program based on the hard work of the previous generation of McKennas. UF/IFAS supplies the science to update the Florida citrus best management practices manual to reflect that trees aren't taking up nutrients as well as they did before. Individual protective covers and a sophisticated pest control strategy also figure into improved tree health.

The new generation of McKennas' brand of clear-eyed optimism helped reaffirm my own commitment to delivering scientific solutions to greening.

While they were quick to credit the science that has kept their groves productive in recent years, they also pushed me for more science. That's why they have been champions for the new UF/IFAS Crop Transformation Center. They see in its mission to deploy biotechnology to genetically modify trees a new science-based path to the future.

"Before it was hope. Now it's a risk," Riley said of the industry outlook.

"An educated risk," said Morgan, finishing her cousin's thought. "It's not just all hope and passion."

## VISION ORIENTED

In another corner of Polk County earlier the same day, Steven Callaham took me through a much different angle on the future. He is still planting in the 500 acres in Fort Meade that he has put under netting. Citrus under protective screen (CUPS) did so well in Bartow for him that he was emboldened to go much bigger.

The size of his CUPS operation isn't the only thing he changed. Capital from outside the industry built the screen structures in Fort Meade because there's confidence that Steven and Florida farmers can scale up what started in Bartow. In addition to his retail marketing program, he is selling direct to consumers with a seasonal gift box business.

Steven demonstrated why he's such a great leader as he drove me between the structures. First, he had a talented business partner riding shotgun. Jennifer Schaal knows Dundee Citrus Growers Association and the CUPS business backward and forward and has been doing a disproportionate amount of work while Steven leads the Florida Fruit & Vegetable Association as its board chair.

Second, Steven somehow drove between the structures while looking backwards to maintain eye contact with me. Like in business, he could already see ahead, so it didn't matter which direction his eyes were focused.



Left to right: Morgan McKenna Porter, Scott Angle and Riley McKenna

Fortunately for the citrus industry, he could see a future in building structures and building on a foundation of UF/IFAS science. And he has continued to look back to make sure others can see the way, too.

Callaham has been in citrus for more than 30 years. Riley and Morgan have developed into the growers and leaders they are because their fathers and other veterans like Callaham have been in the trenches through two decades of greening. They're keeping an industry alive to give a new generation the opportunity to have careers in it.

What the McKennas and Callaham have in common is their focus on the future and its requirements for innovation.

The trees aren't the only things that are acting differently. Riley's acting differently, too. Early this year he became president of the board of the Highlands County Citrus Growers Association.

Last year, Riley had another conversation with his dad. He told his dad he was about to buy another grove and then he did it. The trees in it are apparently acting just fine. 🌳

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