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CANKER

State about to lift ban on backyard citrus trees

State officials are expected to announce that residents can replant citrus trees, now that the federal government has abandoned eradication efforts.

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If you are eager to replant those backyard citrus trees chainsawed in the controversial canker eradication program -- get ready.

Agriculture officials, who this week lifted the ban on replanting commercial citrus in groves bulldozed during the eradication program, are likely to do the same for residential citrus. An announcement is expected soon, said Denise Feiber, spokeswoman for the Florida Department of Agriculture.

But Feiber warned: "People need to understand they are planting at their own risk." Canker and a potential tree killer called "citrus greening" disease are still out there, and they can infect newly planted trees.

South Florida homeowners should be able to buy citrus trees within 30 days of the lifting of the ban, said Phil Rucks, immediate past president of the Florida Citrus Nurserymen's Association.

"Trees will be available pretty soon, but supplies will be limited. Nurseries cut production back years ago because of the quarantine," Rucks said.

The change in policy does not mean the lifting of the quarantine that covers nearly all of Broward and Miami-Dade counties as well as parts of Monroe and Palm Beach counties. No citrus fruit or citrus plant material can be moved out of a quarantine area, Feiber said.

BOOM TO BUST

There's a big market for residential citrus trees in South Florida. Before the quarantine, about 1.5 million trees were sold in South Florida every year, Rucks said. Statewide, three million to four million residential citrus trees are sold annually, he said.

The wholesale price for a five-foot, fruit-bearing citrus tree is about \$14.50. Rucks said he expects that price to double by January 2008, as more costly disease-prevention growing methods are put in place.

Some are enthusiastic about the prospect of replanting residential trees.

ELATION, FRUSTRATION

"I might be driving down to Key Largo this weekend to get a key lime tree if the ban is lifted that soon", said Roxanna Greene, 42, of Hialeah, who lost seven trees to eradication.

Greene said she still can't get used to eating mangoes without a splash of fresh lime juice, or paying \$10 for a bag of key limes in the store.

Others are still frustrated.

"Terrific," fumed Claudette Abrams, a Hollywood homeowner. "I've since relandscaped the yard to take care of what was taken up, and really, now there's no more room."

Abrams, who participated in an unsuccessful lawsuit against the eradication program, does not expect she'll ever replace the five trees she lost: a lemon, a lime, a grapefruit and two orange trees.

"Let's put it this way. I'm going to be 69 in April and I don't think I'll bother," she said.

Canker is harmless to humans but it blemishes fruit and weakens the tree, eventually causing it to lose production, citrus officials say. Starting in 1994, the state and federal governments spent more than \$500 million eradicating commercial and residential trees, hoping to stop the spread of canker.

About 850,000 residential trees have been taken from more than 300,000 homes statewide -- most of them in South Florida. In addition, nearly 100,000 acres of commercial citrus were uprooted and burned in the effort to stop the tree disease.

In January, the federal government declared the battle unwinnable. It said it would quit funding the program because hurricanes had spread the disease so widely that canker was unstoppable.

MORE PAYMENTS?

The federal government had paid another \$436 million as compensation to commercial growers for trees lost to the program. Officials said there was a possibility of paying another \$1.5 billion in eradication and compensation costs.

The canker program broke the spirits of Herbert Yamamura, a Homestead grower who lost 60,000 full-grown lime trees in 1999 and declared personal bankruptcy. Yamamura now works for another grower, New Limeco L.L.C., owned by a former competitor.

Though devastated by the loss of his business, Yamamura was happy to hear planting might be possible again. He said the owner of his company, Alcedes Acosta, has 100 acres in which he would strongly consider planting limes.

Yamamura said whatever future the industry has in Miami-Dade will depend on the real estate market. "You're certainly not going to be growing in land that costs \$100,000 an acre," he said.

Lifelong citrus grower Bobby Barben, 56, of Avon Park was encouraged by the possibility of replanting. He lost 110 acres of mostly Valencia oranges to canker last fall.

"I would like to get it back into production as fast as I can to reap the benefits of the higher prices now," Barben said.

He knows there's a risk the bacteria might be nearby and his young replants might be vulnerable to canker again.

"You don't want to throw good money after bad. It is like walking a tightrope. You don't want to make any mistakes," Barben said.