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Florida citrus farmers find new cash crops to diversify business

By Kelly Griffith

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PIERSON, Fla. --

Gene Evans' farm sprawls across 1,700 acres, but his family's agricultural future fits in just a fraction of that space.

Borrowing technology used at Epcot's Living Seas aquariums, the pioneering Florida aquaculture farmer plans for a future where a mere 250 acres breeds a species of fish new to most American palates, while also signaling the changing times in the state's agricultural picture.

A macadamia farmer in South Florida has the same vision for his prized trees, which fit 100 to an acre, as state officials tout corn-for-ethanol as a viable cash crop.

Florida's top crop? Citrus? Try ferns. Greenhouse and nursery plants top the agricultural charts these days.

Never before have Florida's growers and ranchers needed innovation, creativity and smart business sense to thrive under increasing pressures from development and mounting competition from imports, say agriculture experts and diehard farmers who would rather change what they grow or how they raise it than leave a way of life they love.

U.S. Rep. Adam Putnam, who represents Polk County, one of the state's top five agricultural counties, introduced federal legislation in March that would provide more government support for specialty crops, and help with pest and disease control, nutrition, conservation, trade and research. Specialty crops often do not qualify for federal subsidies even though they account for one-third of all U.S. farm receipts, he said.

And the future likely will see more evolution, experts say.

Agriculture Commissioner Charles Bronson trumpets a Florida where farmers will grow not only food crops but "fuel" crops as a second source of income, such as corn to make ethanol.

State officials do not have statistics on how many farmers might already be doing it, but nationwide, the trend is catching on.

In the mid-1990s for instance, 500,000 bushels of corn were used in the United States to make ethanol, a biofuel. In 2006, 2 billion bushels were expected to be used, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Blueberry grower Jerry Mixon, 45, of Haines City kept his hand in electrical contracting, cattle and citrus when the family farm diversified into blueberry production in the 1990s.

The Mixons have begun marketing blueberries around the world and a few years ago launched a blackberry farm in Georgia. He never envisioned himself a marketing guru, but diversifying gave him a broader base of operations to lean on - and to sell his berries.

Crops other farmers are planting in greater numbers than in years past include avocados, squash, honeydews, broccoli and carrots.

Research from 2005 shows farmers who diversify their land earn 2 1/2 times the income per farm of those who don't.

The whole point? A farmer's land needs to be more valuable to keep than to sell. The most valuable asset most farmers have is their land, the value of which increased about 6 percent nationwide last year - almost all of that attributed to more demand for nonagricultural uses, which in Florida has typically meant for housing or commercial development.

Whether or not to sell a farm often comes down to simple finances, and for many farmers, it has made more sense to sell.

"A farmer's got to be like anyone else," Bronson said. "Feed his family."

But don't write Florida farming's obituary just yet, he adds.

The agriculture community in Florida knows Gene Evans well. Many, including Bronson, are watching him closely.

The large concrete tanks on his Volusia County property contain one of the few commercial sturgeon-farming operations in the Western Hemisphere. Russian sturgeon - about the size of a porpoise - are native to the Caspian Sea, where it normally takes 20 to 30 years for the fish to produce top-shelf caviar and "white as snow" meat, said Evans, 67.

He thinks he can reduce that to seven years in Florida's warm waters and has launched a complex operation aimed at raising the fish from hatchlings. If he is successful, he will have a near-monopoly on the production of top-quality caviar in the United States, which he says could be highly profitable.

"People are taking a wait-and-see attitude to see how this works," he said of others who wonder whether a small piece of land can support such an enterprise. The rest of his land has cattle, timber and corn.

He is in the process of building a "zero waste" water-recycling facility with large sand filters based on a system used at Living Seas, where his daughter works as a marine biologist. Some of the overflow can be pumped to irrigate a cornfield from an underground irrigation system. The corn is used to feed his cattle.

"In 10 years, this will support this farm," he said of the prized sturgeon.

Near Fort Myers, George Anderson, 70, is looking to macadamia nuts - once thought to be ungrowable in Florida - for the same result. He thinks they could be the trees that save many citrus farmers. Anderson's nursery has a hard time keeping up with orders these days, and the trees have the potential to become a financial boon, he said.

They aren't prone to canker or greening, are cold-hardy and produce 300 pounds of nuts per tree at maturity, he said. Selling for \$5 per pound and squeezing 100 trees per acre, the nuts, he thinks, are a financial no-brainer.

"We can slow the urban growth and slow the developers because the \$150,000 (macadamia's potential annual yield) per acre makes the land more valuable to keep than to sell," said Anderson, a financial planner who retired to nut growing as a "hobby." He now has 28 varieties and orders trees from 18 growers.

Unlike Mixon, Mike Drawdy of Imperial Tropicals in Polk City doesn't really want to grow blueberries. Or strawberries.

Or anything else besides angelfish and black mollies and swordtails or any of the other 60 varieties of tropical fish he raises. Foreign competition, though, could force him to.

"We like what we do, and we are good at what we do," he said of the family business, part of a \$3.1 million export concern. "But anytime you are dealing with agriculture, all it takes is a hurricane, disease or something to wipe you out. And so the more you can diversify, the safer it is."

Other, more-experienced farmers have encouraged Drawdy, 29, to go into blueberries or strawberries, a \$1.5 billion industry in Florida.

"We've kicked it around about doing blueberries," he said. "We're going to do our best to be as diverse as we can. ... One way or another, we're going to make it."

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