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Florida citrus industry faces new peril

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CLEWISTON --

The mechanical clipper rumbles close, lowers its steel pincers, takes aim. A slight squeak. A sharp *crack*.

Another orange tree, infected by the spit of a gnat-sized insect and condemned by a scarlet letter X, is "pushed." Death came in six seconds.

On this day alone, in this single grove, 300 trees will be clipped and burned. It's like this every day now for the citrus industry, under attack by a new threat called greening. "A sad deal," said Jim Snively, a fourth-generation grower.

One of Florida's original industries -- "Come to the Florida Sunshine Tree" -- is shrinking, battling and evolving as it confronts disease and development, globalization and dehydration, periodic freezes and serial hurricanes.

What citrus is not doing is dying. It remains a \$9 billion industry, still one of the most lucrative crops grown in a state largely propelled into existence by oranges and grapefruit.

Yet as another harvest begins, it also can't be said to be carefree and thriving.

The story of citrus is complex and nuanced -- and it is not over, growers say.

"It is a huge struggle, but this is something that citrus growers over the generations have wrestled with and they've always come out on top," said Mike Sparks, chief executive of the Florida Citrus Mutual, an industry group that still represents 8,000 growers.

Only vegetables and melons, considered a single entity by state statisticians, account for more agricultural sales in Florida, and the state remains the world's third leading producer of citrus -- behind only Brazil and China.

But survival requires persistence, creativity, cooperation -- and pure luck.

"I am not sure which is the worse gambling problem -- citrus or going to Vegas," said Steve Rogers, whose family has been growing citrus in the Lakeland area for generations.

Yes, the industry has shriveled and is producing less fruit, but the hardiest growers are making more money as the law of supply and demand kicks in. At the same time, fewer

oranges also means higher prices for consumers -- a gallon of juice cost about \$3.80 in 1997, about \$5.70 now.

Yes, the state's ultimately futile canker eradication program -- widely criticized as arbitrary and heavy-handed -- claimed 865,000 residential trees in South Florida and elsewhere, but the campaign also destroyed 15.6 million commercial and nursery trees.

Yes, the industry has learned to live with the notorious canker bacteria, but now, largely unnoticed by the public, it's more imperiled by greening, a disease caused by a different bacterium that is injected into the plant through the bite of the tiny psyllid.

Unlike canker, greening actually kills citrus trees.

Southern Gardens Citrus, a subsidiary of U.S. Sugar and one of the state's largest growers, has lost 100,000 of its 2.3 million trees -- more than 4 percent -- to greening in the past two years.

That magnitude of loss requires growers to adopt drastic steps. How drastic?

Ten years ago, Southern Gardens had five disease "scouts" on the payroll. Now, it has 40 who walk through the remote, sandy groves of Hendry County, methodically searching for signs of greening.

They also have eight front-loaders that clip and stack sick trees.

"Greening has been a scourge every place that it's been," said Tom Spreen, professor and chairman of the University of Florida's Food and Resource Economics Department. "It literally is the black plague of citrus."

And it is just one of many stubborn challenges for an industry that remains of crucial importance to Florida, even after all of these years.

"Florida orange juice isn't going away, and neither are we," said Ricke Kress, Southern Gardens' president.

Like cattle ranchers, citrus growers represent old Florida at its best. They tend to be genuine, humble and polite -- "sir" and "ma'am," "darn" and "shoot," boots and jeans. And a wide streak of tenacity.

"Don't forget," Sparks said, "the whole state of Florida just cannot be condos and highways."

Sometimes, though, it seems that it is.

You can drive along Florida's Turnpike from Hollywood to beyond Orlando -- a route colored by groves as recently as 10 years ago -- with hardly an orange or grapefruit tree in sight.

Commercial acreage is down from 941,000 in 1970 to 832,000 in 2001 to 621,000 now, citrus morphing into condos in Davie and Bradenton, Vero Beach and Port St. Lucie, Lakeland and Clermont.

But 621,000 acres, the equivalent of 970 square miles, is not insignificant. And, from the growers' perspective, fewer trees do not necessarily mean financial ruin.

In the world of commodities, less supply nearly always means higher prices, so although acreage plummeted 22 percent between 2004 and 2005, the value of Florida's more scarce citrus crop increased 14 percent to \$1.02 billion. Last year, sales rose to \$1.36 billion.

As those cash receipts rebound around Florida's farm supply stores, trucking companies, processing plants, supermarkets, shopping malls and other businesses, they end up contributing about \$9 billion in indirect annual economic impact, according to the University of Florida, state officials and the Citrus Mutual.

In the lobby of the group's office building in downtown Lakeland, a plaque honors Citrus Mutual pioneer A.B. Michael, a grower from the Vero Beach area. Michael's pet phrase was, "Don't fret."

Michael died in 1964, and things are very different now. Ask about the struggle, and growers will fret like crazy.

Let us count the ways:

DISEASE

For more than a decade, canker stood at the top of the worry list. Harmless to humans, the disease mars fruit and undermines the health of trees.

The industry said canker had to be eradicated, no holds barred, igniting the \$1 billion state and federal program that infuriated backyard growers in South Florida and around the state.

But the campaign failed, a victim of its own lawsuit-generating aggression and the barrage of hurricanes that struck the state in 2004 and 2005, blowing the disease hither and yon.

Now, although canker is more widespread, the industry is moderating its assessment of the threat.

"We can live with canker," Sparks said. "There are protocols set up. We are in a canker suppression program, not a canker eradication program."

At the same time, growers are concentrating on greening and the tristeza virus.

Greening, described by many experts as the world's worst citrus disease, attacks a tree's vascular system, eating away at the tree from the inside. It discolors and curls leaves, sours fruit and eventually kills the tree.

"Greening is our top problem right now," Sparks said. "No question about it."

The challenge is compounded when growers abandon a grove or a homeowner ignores early evidence of tree sickness. In both cases, disease can spread swiftly to productive groves that had been given the best of care.

One solution, growers say, is aggressive action.

At Southern Gardens, anyone entering -- or leaving -- the grove must submit to full-body disinfection, walking through a showerlike device reminiscent of an automated carwash.

Once inside the grove, Earnestine Brown and other scouts spend all day -- five or six days a week -- marking sick trees with Rust-Oleum "red-orange fluorescent" paint and tying pink ribbons to exterior branches.

The task takes a toll. At night, Brown said, she now dreams of long rows of condemned trees.

"You get a down feeling about it," she said, "because you know you're losing a lot of trees."

Another key to battling greening is close cooperation among growers, juice processors, scientists, regulatory agencies and politicians.

"We can't solve this problem by ourselves," Kress said. "In order to protect the Florida citrus business, we've all got to work together."

He said Southern Gardens is trying to set a good example, letting other growers observe and copy what it does. "We have opened our total program, everything we are doing, to any grower in the state," Kress said.

LABOR SHORTAGES

The nationwide controversy over immigration policy, especially as it applies to the battle against terrorism, is playing out in Florida's groves.

Growers say they can barely find enough workers to harvest the crop -- and they want relief, lest more of the business moves to Brazil or elsewhere overseas.

"If you think we have a security problem now, wait until we have to rely on other countries for our food -- that's a real security problem," Sparks said.

At the same time, industry engineers and scientists are working on new fruit-picking machines and experimental chemical substances that might allow oranges to be pulled from trees more efficiently.

"We have been harvesting citrus the same way for 100 years -- a laborer, a bag and a ladder," Sparks said. "I think you will see some changes in that in the immediate future."

WEATHER

Not many industries can be affected, simultaneously, by hurricanes and drought, but citrus has managed it.

Some of this is pure luck.

Did your grove get hit by the last hurricane? Even if it didn't, did those winds blow something microscopic and ugly from 60 miles away into your grove?

Some of this risk can be managed. A devastating series of freezes in 1983, 1985 and 1989 chased much of the industry to the warmer southern third of the state, which now is in the throes of an enduring drought.

"We're sweating bullets right now whether or not we are going to have enough water for next year," Snively said.

In response, large, wasteful overhead water sprayers are being replaced with Israeli-style drip irrigation systems that string tubing along the ground and distribute water with considerable thrift and efficiency.

Still, more frequent rain wouldn't hurt.

"Irrigation does a good job of maintaining the tree," Kress said, "but rainwater grows the tree."

DEVELOPMENT

The profound effect of development can easily be seen from atop the Citrus Tower in Clermont, west of Orlando.

As recently as the 1980s, the 360-degree panorama revealed as many as 17 million orange and grapefruit trees within 20 square miles, the tantalizing aroma of citrus spicing the air.

Now, the 226-foot Citrus Tower still stands, more of a museum than a boast. And the view is mostly of houses rather than Hamlins. So, where's the citrus?

"It's not here anymore," said Wanda Hawkins, who sells \$4 tickets at the tower. "The trees all froze out. Sometimes I just tell people, 'The snowman stole them.' "

The underlying truth is that many growers -- particularly those in the path of suburban development -- now view themselves as being partly in the real-estate business.

Say, for instance, an acre of citrus yields \$1,000 a year in profit -- a figure industry economists call realistic. Now, what happens if a developer offers \$30,000 for that acre?

"It is not a matter of them being forced to sell, but it's more a matter of, 'Well, my God, Martha, you know, that's our 401(k) right there,' " said Spreen, the UF economist.

" 'Yeah, I know my granddaddy planted this grove back in the '50s, but how can I turn down that kind of money?' "

Multiple diseases, labor shortages, competition from Brazil and other countries, freezes, hurricanes, developers waving attractive offers -- why not just sell the land and move on?

Growers talk about the remaining profit potential, but they also talk about family and tradition, the joy and potential profit of producing something colorful, tasty and healthy.

"Anyone who loves their job and is good at their job will tell you that money is not the only thing that drives them," said Rogers, the Lakeland-area grower. "We just love the citrus business. We just love to see the greenery.

"Whereas someone might see it as a very risky business -- it *is* a very risky business -- it is our comfort zone. To produce a product that is going to be eaten by thousands or millions of people around the world, we just love that aspect of it."