

A proud tradition



By Rick Dantzer, CRDF chief operating officer

The great Jim Ellis suggested that I devote a few columns to some of the innovative things Florida citrus growers are doing to grow citrus successfully in the HLB era. I thought that was a fine idea, especially since it was coming from a member of the Florida Citrus Hall of Fame.

Kicking off this series is an article on the grove operations of Southern Gardens Citrus, an entity that farms 13,000 acres of Florida sunshine. Jim Snively serves as the company's vice president of grove operations.

Snively's citrus pedigree is about as linear as it could be, going all the way back to his great-grandfather, John A. Snively, one the patriarchs of the Florida citrus industry. The senior Snively honeymooned in Winter Haven, liked what he saw and moved there in 1911. By 1914, he was well immersed in the citrus industry and on his way to owning 10,000 acres of Florida groves.

From great-grandfather, to grandfather, to father to son, Snively never knew life apart from citrus. Graduating from Florida Southern College with a degree in citrus management, he was well prepared to start his work with Southern Gardens in 2002.

"There's no big secret to what we're doing," Snively says. "We use a combination of fertigation and dry fertilizer. We believe we can sustain a high level of production with proper nutrition and psyllid control. We've reduced our psyllid spraying pretty significantly, from approximately once a month to five or six times a year on mature trees, and we use sprays that are softer on beneficials. We've also cut our spraying on young trees by about half."

Southern Gardens conducts a lot of its own research and believes it has found the "sweet spot," as Snively describes it, at a planting density of between 250 and 300 trees per acre on roughly an 8-foot by 22-foot set. Compost is put in prior to planting and more is added later.

As for rootstocks, "We plant 942 when we can get it, but we also plant a lot of Kuharske and Volk," says Snively.

With the newest citrus processing facility in Florida, Southern Gardens grows only juice oranges, primarily Valencias and Hamlins, with some Vernia and Valquarius.

The business will discontinue its 250-acre bactericide trials after one more year. "Results have not shown any significant differences," Snively notes.

When asked about Southern Gardens research in developing a genetically modified organism by using a spinach defensin gene, Snively says he is "encouraged," but is even more excited about using the tristeza virus to deliver the spinach defensin into the phloem, a sentiment echoed by Tim Eyrich, Southern Gardens vice president of research and product development.

"We're happy to share anything we're doing with the industry," Snively remarks. This generous attitude is something I have noticed about Southern Gardens and its parent company, U.S. Sugar, for decades. Whether it's serving on a committee, helping to solve a public policy issue or supporting worthy causes, employees never turn down reasonable requests. It's a tradition that I believe Jim's great grandfather would be proud to see him continuing.



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