

# A Good Horse



By Rick Dantzer, CRDF chief operating officer

As the late great Pete Clemons once told me, “If you find a good horse, ride him.” The same could be said of nurseryman Phil Rucks and his industry leadership. Four years as president of the Florida Citrus Nursery Association and eight years as chairperson of the Florida Nursery, Growers and Landscape Association’s Citrus Nursery Division is like the good horse that was ridden hard.

These leadership roles put Rucks on the front lines of many issues, including the effort to mandate that trees be grown from registered budwood, an unpopular position with many nursery growers. “I was accused of being a communist and supporting a government takeover of our industry, but we had to do it,” explains Rucks. “People were cutting budwood from any tree on the side of the road that looked good, and young plantings with disease were on the rise.”

Soon thereafter, in 1997, Rucks went into business for himself. But if it hadn’t been for longtime nurseryman Bill Adams challenging him to do so, he might never have done it, and North America’s largest citrus nursery under cover — with 350,000 square feet — might never have been built. “He told me I had learned the business and it was time,” says Rucks.

HLB changed everything, Rucks says. “We were told that no industry had ever survived it, so we became more efficient wherever we could. We gained 30 percent more space by utilizing benches on rollers for the trees to sit on, eliminating aisles throughout the nursery. We implemented a Dutch-style rail system, workstation and head house with tunnels to the greenhouses, saving 50 percent in labor costs. We designed a new tree container for our trees to maximize space on the benches, and installed irrigation mats that were water efficient. We also began mixing our own custom blend of potting soil.”

This helped, but his most prescient decision was to screen-in budwood trees in 2000, initially to prevent severe tristeza strains, but unknowingly making him ready when HLB hit. “I realized I could get one million trees from just what I had under cover, but I was also stuck with 650,000 contracted trees that were in jeopardy of not being able to be sold, a situation many were in when HLB hit,” Rucks says. The issue was resolved when he and others negotiated a resolution with the Division of Plant Industry (DPI).

The industry’s relationship with DPI is a source of pride for Rucks because it hasn’t always been so good, he says, reflecting on the early days of leaf spot and canker. “The relationship is better than it has ever been; they work with us, not against us.”

Rucks and his wife of 33 years, Tina, have built quite a business. He credits many people for his success.

“I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for a lot of other people,” Rucks concludes. “It always seemed like when one door closed, another opened. It’s divine intervention.”



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