

Six Decades of Experience Speaks



By Rick Dantzler

This is the third entry in a series that shares what those in the citrus industry are doing to be successful in the HLB era. The first column was on Jim Snively and Southern Gardens, one of the largest citrus-growing companies in Florida. Phil Rucks' adaptation in growing nursery trees was the topic of the second article. This month, the focus is on a grower of fewer acres but one with a strong citrus background, Frank Thullbery of Lake Wales. At 89 years young, he isn't shy about sharing his thoughts.

"We have to get past the idea that greening kills trees because it doesn't. It makes them sick and other stuff kills them, and foot rot is the biggest problem of all," says Thullbery. "Growers aren't treating for foot rot nearly as much as they should. It's in all mature groves. It has to be dealt with or it will kill the trees. And some growers are watering too much. Why water during periods of heavy rainfall? Wet feet set the stage for foot rot. Your grove will let you know when it's thirsty."

There's no question that foot rot is a problem, says University of Florida plant pathologist Megan Dewdney. "Phytophthora foot rot is a perennial concern. Overwatering is a problem for rot management as *Phytophthora nicotianae* needs water to survive and infect," she says.

After graduating from the University of Florida with a degree in citrus horticulture in 1952, it was off to the war in Korea for Thullbery. When he returned, he went to work in the citrus business, ultimately starting Thullbery Caretaking, Inc. with his wife of 68 years, Catherine. They made a dynamic team, growing the business to a peak of 1,600 acres under their care.

They sold the business in 1981 and began overseeing approximately 360 acres for relatives and business partners. Today, Thullbery works only on the 10-acre block he and a nephew bought, but his 21 years as a production manager and 23 years as a caretaker have left him with a wealth of knowledge.

"After getting rid of the bad trees and replanting, we applied a fungal treatment for phytophthora," explains Thullbery. "We apply two or three oil and nutritional sprays in the summer and inject probiotic materials. The oil sprays keep the psyllids down and allow beneficial insects to survive, which helps with the psyllids.

"We apply three applications of high-analysis fertilizer per year, hedge and irrigate with Microjets when necessary. But controlling phytophthora is the key."

I asked Thullbery if he'd be in the citrus business today if he were a young man. "I surely would. I'd be looking for a piece of land to buy that I could plant trees on," he answered. "The problem is too many people let their groves go and then want to sell them as real estate instead of grove."

And the secret to success? "Grow good quality, edible fruit that can be packed fresh, and turn what's left into great NFC (not from concentrate) juice."

It's a strategy that has worked well for him for a very long time.

Postscript: Frank Thullbery's great partner in life and business, his wife Catherine, died just prior to print.

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