

# An Optimistic Outlook



By Rick Dantzler, CRDF chief operating officer

Occasionally I use this column to highlight what specific growers are doing to produce citrus successfully in the HLB era. I haven't found a grower yet who isn't willing to share all he or she knows to help fellow growers, and so it is with Larry Black, general manager of Peace River Citrus. Based in Ft. Meade, this family-owned, fully integrated citrus services company is active in grove care, harvesting, fresh fruit packing and processed fruit sales on more than 3,200 acres.

"Are you bullish on the industry?" I asked Black.

"Absolutely," he replied without hesitation. "We are planting new acreage every year and rehabilitating low-producing groves using the latest technologies. We are big believers in high-density planting — 303 trees per acre in most cases. Building a new grove is so expensive you must get early yields to offset capital costs.

"Everything is grove specific. We take annual soil and leaf tests in each block, and test sentinel blocks quarterly. These test results then drive our nutrition program, which is a hybrid of conventional, controlled-release and liquid fertilizer.

"We've had the most success with Valencia but are impressed with Valquarius. We have 60 acres and plan to expand. The HLB tolerance appears similar to Valencia, and we begin harvesting in January, so it extends the Valencia harvest window."

Black leaves the Citrus Research and Development Foundation (CRDF) board this month, term-limited out after nine years, including two as president. "I have really enjoyed my time on the CRDF board, especially working with industry greats like Hugh Thompson, Tom Jerkins, Bobby Barben, John Updike, Joe Davis Jr., and the list goes on and on," he said. "I've gotten more out of CRDF than the time I've invested in it.

"Research is just so critically important. We must support the research efforts of our land-grant universities and the USDA."

"What will the industry look like in 20 years?" I asked.

"Acreage will have rebounded," Black answered. "With our unique location, which allows us to grow high-quality fruit and a lot of it, and our proximity to the brands' processing plants, the industry will recover."

"And what about HLB?" I inquired.

"I like the term I've heard you use: functionally irrelevant," Black replied. "That's what I think it will be. Better plant material, superior nutrition and other therapies will have allowed us to move on to other challenges."

Black's optimism comes through in everything he says: "This is such an exciting time in the industry, a great time of innovation. New varieties, CUPS ... I'm so glad to be a part of it."

And a part of it he is. A fifth-generation grower currently serving on the boards of Florida's Natural Growers, Florida Citrus Mutual and Polk County Farm Bureau, Black gives freely of his time. "We have a relatively small industry, so we have to step up and work together," he concluded.

*Author's Note: The CRDF thanks Larry for his steady hand of leadership during his time on the board.*



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