

# What Is Old Might Be New



By Rick Dantzler, CRDF chief operating officer

“There seems to be with orange growers a considerable interest manifested in the Parson Brown orange, and as I once owned the tree that produced this now famous orange, and was the first orange grower who brought this fine fruit to the notice of the Northern public, I will, with your permission, give your readers a short history of this tree,” said Capt. J.L. Carney in a 1896 letter to Florida Farmer & Fruit Grower.

What follows in the letter is a history of the establishment of the Parson Brown orange and how the first buds were taken from a tree owned by Uncle Brown, a Methodist minister (hence the name). He was reputed to have the best tree of this genotype.

The Parson Brown orange had a checkered past. Emanating from the Lake Weir area, it spread across the citrus landscape, growing in popularity because of its good flavor, excellent color and early-season maturity. It was seedy, though, and had more than an average amount of peel oil. Consequently, it fell into less favor than other varieties, such as Hamlin. Still, it hung on, and more than a few growers continued to grow it.

When HLB hit, it was noticed that some Parson Browns seemed to be faring better than other genotypes. In fact, one grower claims to continue to pick upwards of 600 boxes per acre from his Parson Brown grove. This caught the attention of University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences emeritus Extension agent Gary England. He aims to document Parson Brown’s true status and determine which clones are best.

England is working with CRDF’s Brandon Page and Manjul Dutt of UF/IFAS, who presented CRDF with a research proposal to determine why Parson Brown seems to stand up to HLB better than many cultivars. It is suspected that Parson Brown has higher levels of the PR1 and PR2 defense genes, which are the molecular markers of systemic acquired resistance, than Hamlin. The research project will determine if this is the case.

But what about the high peel oil and seed content qualities that caused Parson Brown to fall into disfavor with processors? With an orange crop estimate of 57 million boxes in Florida, processors are in such need of fruit that factors such as high peel oil and seeds are of lesser concern than they once were. And plant breeders have indicated an ability to breed the less desirable characteristics out of the fruit over time.

Some of the earlier and perhaps best Parson Brown clones are few in number, so a priority is to preserve the gene sequence for those that are considered the best. That work, perhaps with the assistance of a funding partner, will be considered, as well.

Wouldn’t it be something if part of the solution to HLB has been with us all along, and the good ol’ Parson Brown is part of the answer? We will soon find out.



Column sponsored by the Citrus Research and Development Foundation