

Making HLB Functionally Irrelevant



By Rick Dantzer, CRDF chief operating officer

My goal for the Citrus Research and Development Foundation (CRDF) is to eradicate HLB or make it functionally irrelevant. Either through base hits that lead to runs or all at once with a homerun, one way or another we will eradicate greening or make it functionally irrelevant.

One way to make it functionally irrelevant is through the development of greening-tolerant rootstocks and scions. The CRDF Select Committee on Plant Improvement, chaired by John Gose, is working hard to make sure growers receive the data they need to make informed choices about what to plant.

Working with the plant breeders CRDF funds, the Select Committee is discussing standardizing plant breeding trial design and measurement criteria throughout the plant breeding pipeline. This would make replicated data — especially in the last phase where trees are shown to either work in a commercial environment or not — available for growers to see how new genotypes compare. The goal is not to stifle the creativity of plant breeders in the early stages, but to create uniformity in evaluation so that a tree that looks particularly good will have enough replicated data to allow an informed decision about how good it just might be.

Over the last six years, CRDF has had three last-stage field trials that growers have said have been among the most helpful to them in deciding what to plant. Given the success of these trials, the CRDF board, with initial encouragement from our president David Howard, has decided to conduct more trials of the latest and most promising rootstocks. The goal is to include up to 20 rootstocks grown on three industry-standard scions: Valencia, Vernia and Hamlin. These three scions were the top three budded scions in 2019–2020. With Hamlin being particularly susceptible to HLB, it will give a quick indication of HLB tolerance in the rootstock.

I have visited many of the breeders' trial sites, and there are many rootstocks from which to choose. Robust trees with good fruit, few thorns and very low titer counts lead me to believe we are close to having new and better orange cultivars that can be grown profitably — even when growers aren't receiving premium prices for their fruit. In other words, trees that make HLB functionally irrelevant.

These rootstock trials will require grower-cooperators. If you are interested in hosting one of these trials, please contact us. CRDF will pay for the trees, planting costs and tree wraps.

Overseeing these trials will be CRDF's Brandon Page, a highly motivated and dedicated employee who understands the last stage of field trials as well as anybody. I am excited about these trials and the work that is to come from the Select Committee.

A thought that has surfaced is that a scion trial could be just as valuable as a rootstock trial. My sense is the Select Committee could very well turn its attention to scions after completing its review of rootstocks. So, don't be surprised if CRDF embarks upon a scion trial in the relatively near future.

