

Keeping the Conversation Going



By Rick Dantzler, CRDF chief operating officer

Here is a question that I bet only citrus growers over the age of 60 can answer. What do the following have in common: the Babson Park Restaurant in Babson Park, the Seminole Inn in Indiantown, Flora & Ella's in LaBelle, Gabby's in Winter Haven, the Holiday Inn by the Turnpike near Vero Beach, and Breton's in Bartow? They were all restaurants where Florida citrus growers gathered for meals. But more importantly, they were places to discuss the art of growing citrus.

We need such places again. We simply can't have another year next year like this one. Production must increase, and quality must rise — or the entire industry will suffer.

Early signs are good: the bloom set was outstanding; the Citrus Research and Development Foundation (CRDF) is evaluating research proposals that will offer short-term assistance to growers; and the Florida Department of Citrus (FDOC) has marketing money to try to keep the upsurge in consumption of orange juice going. Still, the practical tips growers swap among themselves over coffee is an integral part of their success.

For that reason, CRDF is looking at ways it can facilitate such conversations. Here are several ideas we are considering:

1. At the beginning of each board meeting, we would schedule presentations from researchers we have funded whose projects have ended. This is a practice we started a year ago to give the researchers an opportunity to share their findings, and for board members to evaluate if the project was worth your money.

Following these presentations would be a roundtable meeting with the grower members of the board and growers from the area to discuss the research findings and the practices they are using which seem to be working — or not. This would give growers a forum to learn from each other.

2. An educational seminar held in conjunction with Florida Citrus Mutual that would highlight grower conversations about their production practices. The format is still evolving, but it would probably be a combination of in-person and virtual presentations.

3. Grower roundtables with other grower organizations that highlight citrus production in their parts of the state.

4. Roundtable discussions between growers, processors and the FDOC about synergistic business practices and marketing needs that benefit the industry as a whole. It is time for absolute candor about what processors need, what the FDOC believes it can do, and what growers believe they can grow. Unity has never been more important.

These are just four ideas we have had, and I'm sure there are more. Don't worry; CRDF has not forgotten its primary mission of funding research useful to growers. However, growers and industry partners discussing citrus business over bacon and eggs or around the campfire is indispensable. There is no doubt that growers still speak a lot between themselves. But for growers who aren't part of such conversations, there is a need for more formal settings.

CRDF intends to help facilitate it.

