

Juice Quality Is Key



By Rick Dantzler, CRDF chief operating officer

I recently met with several blue-chip growers about gibberellic acid and 2,4-D to reduce fruit drop. It was an interesting conversation and made clear a couple of areas that the Citrus Research and Development Foundation (CRDF) should address.

Near the end of the meeting, I asked the growers what they would do for the industry if they could be king for a day, and more specifically, what they would do if they were me. Each said the focus must be on practices that enhance fruit quality. They believe if we don't maintain juice quality, Florida could lose its niche of growing fruit of not-from-concentrate (NFC) quality, which would be catastrophic.

One of the growers then asked a provocative question: "What if we had a crash planting program of Sugar Belle® to specifically grow fruit for processing?" We kicked this around and saw merit in blending juice from Sugar Belle® with other orange juice products as a way of enhancing quality, while also acknowledging its limitations. I was intrigued and brought the idea back to the CRDF board for a closer look.

Sugar Belle® was developed by University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences breeders as a mandarin hybrid. Resembling Minneola tangelo, it has rich, reddish-orange juice color and rates high in many taste panels of consumers. Most important, it is fairly tolerant of HLB.

Sugar Belle® has problems, though. The fruit can get soft, especially later in the picking cycle or when autumn and early winter temperatures are warmer than usual, making transportation in full loads impossible. The picking window is short, and peel creasing is also an issue.

Early in the season, the juice tends to be high in acid, and obtaining a 12 or 13 ratio may be difficult in some years. Still, while juice quality is not out of this world, it is high enough to help current Hamlin juice if mixed.

The National Agricultural Statistics Service reports there are 725.8 acres of Sugar Belle® in Florida. Last year, 21,380 boxes were processed (most went to fresh).

Trees are generally quite vigorous and fast-growing, fruiting well at three years of age. At 180 trees/acre, 4- and 5-year-old trees could produce 200 boxes/acre; 6-year-old trees and above may produce up to 300 boxes/acre.

A pool price for Sugar Belle® grown for blending would need to be higher than the elimination pool price, and growers would need to know they had a market for the fruit.

Since Sugar Belle® is a hybrid, its juice and that of other hybrids could account for no more than 10% of the juice in NFC, but there is a long way to go before hitting the 10% mark. It should be easier to increase the 10% limit than to change the definition of round oranges.

It is critical for Florida to maintain its juice quality, and CRDF is working on it. Nevertheless, the idea of a crash planting program involving Sugar Belle® — while certainly not perfect — is intriguing.



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