

Defining Success

By Rick Dantzler, CRDF chief operating officer



One dictionary calls success the accomplishment of an aim or purpose. Another describes it as achieving a favorable or desired outcome.

Both are accurate, but how should we define success in our battle against HLB? The answer depends on the point in time over the course of the fight and who you ask.

In the beginning, when we knew so little about HLB, we attacked the disease with academic vigor and filled a library with publications and knowledge of everything we could. This was success, and it laid the foundation for transitioning from basic research to applied research.

Funders did their part to develop a Research Industrial Complex rarely seen in agriculture. Research facilities sprung up around the country, hundreds of new employees were hired, students were educated, and private sector opportunities abounded. Fighting HLB became big business. Coalitions between states with a common goal of defeating HLB took shape, another form of success.

But when you ask Florida citrus growers to define success, they will answer just one way: Has all this effort and money spent allowed me to stay profitable? For most growers, the answer has been no. Until, perhaps, now. Let me explain.

The Citrus Research and Development Foundation has funded numerous trials involving oxytetracycline (OTC). Here are the results:

Following the second year of OTC injections, yield data in multiple trial sites improved by 50% to 100% compared to the untreated controls. Data for fruit quality consistently resulted in higher values for Brix, ratio and pound solids.

Also, an improvement in fruit drop was quantified between OTC-treated trees and untreated controls. The amount of drop prevented varied between trial sites, especially because of complicating factors such as hurricanes, but there was a consistent trend of improvement. What's more, trees that had been injected handled hurricane-force winds better than those which had not.

OTC is working. The precursors to more and better fruit — leaf canopy restoration and root regrowth — are there. And it will only get better.

I'm confident that the third year of OTC usage is going to make a big difference. Assuming there is no hurricane or hard freeze, I predict next year's harvest is going to show a strong gain in yield despite a reduction in acreage.

I'll be the first to admit that a lot is riding on this year of OTC usage, but the signs are suggesting we have the bridge therapy to sustain us until the "tree of the future" arrives. This tree — one that is HLB-resistant, not just more tolerant — is quite possibly with us and is being evaluated.

Do we dare declare success from a grower's perspective — that of profitability? It's too early to know for sure, but I believe we are headed into a time when it will be good financially to be a Florida citrus grower.



Column sponsored by the Citrus Research and Development Foundation