

Profitable Alternatives

By Tom Burfield



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Nontraditional crops can replace or supplement citrus and other commodities

A series of devastating freezes in the early '80s, followed by recent attacks of citrus canker and greening, have launched Florida citrus growers on a search for alternative crops—either as backups to their citrus operations or as entirely new business ventures.

Rather than compete with traditional crops such as tomatoes, many growers and University of Florida researchers are seeking commodities that typically had not been marketed within the state.

To date, blueberries are the most widespread nontraditional crop. Stone fruit also has attracted growers' attention, as have persimmons and some tropical items.

Bountiful berries

Blueberries are really the state's only successful nontraditional crop, according to Keith Mixon, president of SunnyRidge Farm Inc. in Winter Haven. Florida was expected to ship 6 million pounds of blueberries this season, up from last season's 4.7 million pounds, he said.

SunnyRidge, which has grown blueberries since 1993, got into the deal to diversify into niche crops "that were healthy and good to grow," Mixon said. The company previously grew citrus and raised cattle, but its blueberry operation now accounts for 95 percent of its business. SunnyRidge grows 215 acres of the berries and is adding 120 acres this year.

Company representatives discussed

the transition with University of Florida researchers, visited blueberry growers in Florida and other states, and conducted their own tests before jumping into the deal full-bore, Mixon said. It took five to six years to reach promotable volume.

Florida's first real success with blueberries was with southern high-bush varieties in the mid-1970s, said Paul Lyrene, professor with the university's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences in Gainesville. They were first shipped out of state in 1983. High returns appealed to growers, but low yields and production problems—such as late freezes and birds snacking on the berries—presented challenges. Florida had about 1,000 acres of blueberries 10 years ago. Today there are 2,500 acres, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Agricultural Statistics Service.

Despite the acreage increase, Lyrene said there still is plenty of untapped potential for the fruit, estimating that Florida growers could profitably farm 10,000 acres.

During a window from early April to mid-May, Florida is the only place in the world that can produce fresh blueberries, said Alicia Whidden, vegetable crop extension agent with the university based in Seffner, Fla.

A peach of a crop

Stone fruit is another nontraditional crop making headway in Florida. The emphasis has been on early-ripening fruit with a low chilling requirement, said Jose

Chaparro, assistant professor and fruit tree breeder at the university.

Florida varieties would be available from the third week of April through mid-June, providing growers with a window between the end of the Chilean season and the start of the California shipments.

The state now has about 500 acres of peaches, mostly in the north, but a program is under way to promote planting and production in central Florida to capitalize on the early-ripening market, Chaparro said. He would like to see 8,000 acres of stone fruit in the state.

Jack Davis, owner of Florida Peach Co. in Citra, said he's probably been growing peaches longer than anyone else in Florida. He learned by "accident and experimentation" starting when he worked as farm manager at Florida Peach Corp. in the early 1980s.

Davis' own peach program has been going strong since 1993, and it consists largely of the tropic beauty variety developed by the University of Florida.

Today, "non-melter" varieties that don't have the same texture as the tropic beauty are gaining in popularity because they tend to ship better than the tropic beauty, he said.

Thanks to new varieties developed by the University of Florida, peaches can be grown just about anywhere in the state, he said. Davis has 2,000 mature tropic beauty trees and "a significant number" of other varieties.

He encouraged those interested in establishing their own programs to start small, experiment with different varieties to find which work best, check out the university's Web site, www.ifas.ufl.edu, and feel free to contact Davis himself.

Living large with lychees

Lychees may have potential in regions that don't often endure freezing temperatures or late spring frosts, said Jonathan Crane, tropical fruit crop specialist for the university's Homestead location.

Acreage has dropped from 1,200 to about 500 because of foreign competition, but lychees could be successful in Florida if grown during imports' off-season, he said.

Loquats, which resemble small plums, are popular in Asian and Mediterranean cultures and grow well in Florida, Crane said. They are susceptible to the Caribbean fruit fly, but can withstand temperatures as low as 10 F. Since most U.S. consumers are not familiar with loquats, they would need marketing support, he said.

Grower David Romney has worked with tropical fruit all his life, with some time spent in east Africa and the past 18 years spent in Florida growing coconuts, bananas, citrus, longans, lychees, guava and avocados. He looks for marketing windows when tropicals aren't imported.

Nighttime irrigation enables tropical crops to survive all but the harshest of freezes, he said. And tropicals love hot, sticky summer weather.

Russ Mizell, professor of entomology at the IFAS North Florida Research and Education Center—Quincy, is among those encouraging growers to cultivate persimmons. There are at least 1,500 acres in the state, he estimated. They are easy to grow and are bothered by only a few pests.

If you're interested in growing the fruit, consider the Chestnut/Persimmon Short Course and Field Day on Sept. 29 at the Alachua County extension service in Gainesville, suggested Gary Brinen, extension commercial horticulture agent for Alachua County.

Grower Jerry Holly of Double JP Farm in Weirsdale said his 250 persimmons trees started off great, but 100 of his original trees have died. Many of them suffered from a fungal disease. Meanwhile, trees he gave his brother thrive in Gainesville, just 40 miles away, possibly because of the location's

heavier, richer soil. The fruit is delicious and the market is good, especially for the nonstringent varieties, he said, adding that he can sell every piece of fruit he can raise.

Tropical pumpkins, also known as calabazas, are an item Don Maynard, retired professor of horticulture at the IFAS Gulf Coast Research and Education Center in Wimauma, is fond of. It's the same species as the butternut squash, which does not grow well in Florida.

"It's a product everyone would like if they gave it a chance," he said.

There are not many acres of pumpkins being grown in the state, but he said the commodity is easy to grow in Florida's climate. They're produced in the summer when other vegetables can't be grown.

Okra, certain types of eggplant and cow (or black-eyed) peas also do well in summer in Florida, he said.

Take time to research

If you're considering nontraditional crops, do your homework first, suggested Mixon of SunnyRidge Farm.

Blueberries in particular are "significantly more intense than any other crop I know of," he said, and growers tend to underestimate the amount of management and labor the crop requires.

And consider the marketing angle.

"Farm on paper first," said Linda Landrum of the IFAS Small Farms Focus Team. "Before you plant the first seed, know who you are going to sell it to."

IFAS researcher Lyrene suggested consulting www.floridablueberrygrowers.com, the Florida Blueberry Growers Association's Web site, where you can learn about pest and disease management, blueberry varieties and more. He also recommended "Blueberries for Growers, Gardeners and Promoters," a book by Norman Childers, UF professor emeritus in horticultural sciences.

Maynard suggested consulting seed suppliers for information about tropical pumpkins and similar items.

Crane said growers interested in tropicals may visit the Web site for Tropical Fruit Growers of South Florida Inc. at www.tropicalfruitgrowers.com, or try the Miami-Dade County Extension in Homestead.

For information about avocados or lychees, visit <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu> and search for the two commodities. *CVM*