New citrus production
management paradigms

By Timothy M. Spann and Pete Spyke

Citrus greening, citrus canker,
hurricanes, urban sprawl, for-

eign competition and time —
all of these are public enemy No. 1
if you are a Florida citrus grower.
One thing is certain: Becoming a
profitable citrus grower is getting
harder and harder and the future isn’t
exactly a rosy picture if using the
same old methods continues. But for
those who make the investment in
change, there is a future in Florida
citrus that doesn’t involve planting
condominiums. This article looks at
the potential of future citrus produc-
tion, and agriculture in general, in
Florida with particular input from a
progressive industry leader.

For citrus production to continue in
Florida, agriculture in general must
remain a permanent part of the Florida
landscape. Three things must be
achieved if this is to happen:
1) Agriculture remains profitable,
2) successful transfer/purchase of
development rights (TDR)
programs are put in place, and
3) the combined value of future
agricultural income and sale of TDRs
is equal to or greater than the value of
selling the land for development.

We believe all the issues boil down
to time, or a lack thereof. Given the
events of the past few years —
hurricanes and the spread of greening for
example — the industry is in a more
unstable state than it has ever been.
The combinations of issues that man-
agers must deal with are more com-
plex than ever, and there is anxiety.
Managers seem to feel that all they
need to do is to begin doing the
“right” thing now to survive, but no

-- from a manager’s perspective

TDR (transfer of development
rights) programs allow for
the transfer of development
rights from agricultural areas
to designated growth areas
with access to services. They
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cultural and natural resource
values of their land while
simultaneously realizing the
development value.

community identity, and a safe,
reliable domestic food supply.

While most citizens understand
these issues and accept the inherent
value in them, the impetus will be
solid leadership from city and county
governments, through such things as
tax incentives and growth planning, to
secure public support for maintaining
agriculture as a permanent component
of the developed landscape. TDR
programs are an effective tool that
can be used by local and state govern-
ments for this purpose. These
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Successful TDR programs have
been used in other rapidly growing
agricultural areas of the country. For
example, within the California Central
Valley, TDR programs have been used
to maintain agricultural and natural
area “greenways” between valley
cities and towns. This has prevented a
number of small communities within
the valley from growing together to
form vast urban areas, while encour-
gaging infill and redevelopment within
existing cities and towns.

As development swallows up land
at staggering rates, the citrus industry
is one whose crop traditionally takes
10 to 15 years to break even. With
greening, the longevity of trees is now
questionable. IFAS’s role will be one
of helping to develop methods or sys-
tems that allow growers to reach that
break-even point sooner. But it will be
up to individual growers to decide
which of these systems they want to

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adopt, how they want to evolve, and what role they want to play in Florida's agricultural future.

Many within the university and industry have taken the initiative to observe firsthand the production methods used in other citrus growing regions of the world. Some, like Pete Spyke, will adapt the Open Hydroponics System (OHS) methods seen in South Africa, and begin trial plantings. He believes the primary advantage to this system, if properly tailored and practiced in Florida, allows trees to enter production faster. But the system has the additional benefits of potentially having lower environmental impact, having productive groves in the presence of greening as well as allowing for competitive production on smaller acreages. And a return of the smaller grower would have countless benefits to Florida citrus production.

Perhaps the transition from agriculture and development being incompatible to peaceful coexistence will be the greatest paradigm shift of all. In a Florida (hopefully) not too far off, growth can be accommodated in new towns and villages in the countryside, based on traditional neighborhood design, surrounded by permanent open space that includes agriculture, natural systems, recreational areas and other components. Citrus grove designs will have evolved and groves will be completely transparent to local citizens, becoming another part of the green space that adds value to their cities and towns. We are not there now, but the sooner we get going, the faster we will learn and the better the outcomes will be.

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