

Peaches, plums may be next fresh fruit delights

By Robin Koestoyo

Seeking alternative crops for Florida growers, University of Florida researchers grafted low-chill stone fruit varieties adapted to a subtropical climate. The varieties were developed in a plant-breeding program in Gainesville now led by Jose Chaparro, a plant breeder and geneticist, and are being tested at UF research sites in Immokalee and near Fort Pierce.

In mid-October, an orchard containing 14 varieties of peaches and plums was planted at the Indian River Research and Education Center near Fort Pierce. The plantings were grafted from trees in an experimental orchard at the Southwest Florida Research and Education Center in Immokalee.

As the region's citrus acreage diminishes, the goal with stone fruit is to establish temperate species with subtropical varieties, says Brian Scully, professor and director of the IRREC. "We will test the trees in the newly planted orchard to determine if they will perform in this region, which is outside their normal range."

A few of the peach varieties in the grove are Flordaprince, UFSun and Flordaglo; plum varieties include Gulfruby, Hypoluxo and Gulfgold.

Six research scientists will collaborate on the project, including Scully, Chaparro and Bob Rouse, a research professor at the SWFREC. According to Rouse, who originally planted the orchard more than 10 years ago, about 10 citrus growers have planted stone fruit trees. He says most of them have successfully harvested and marketed their crops, and some decided to increase their orchard's size.

Charles Powell, professor, virologist and one of the six collaborators, says Florida citrus growers could use stone fruit to diversify their crops and fill a two-month market window from mid-April through May that is currently vacant.

"These varieties are low-chill, meaning that they only require 100 hours of cooler



COURTESY OF ROBIN KOESTOYO

Charles Powell, professor and virologist at the Indian River Research and Education Center near Fort Pierce, will lead research into the possibility of stone fruit production in Florida.

weather at about 40 to 50 degrees Fahrenheit to produce fruit," Powell says.

At present, the scientists examine the tree's growth, reaction to weather and other factors. The trees are expected to begin bearing fruit in three years, but they likely will not produce a full crop for up to six years. When the trees begin to produce a partial crop, yield data and other information will be measured.

The peaches and plums will require more labor, and upon ripening, they must be harvested immediately, unlike citrus. Local growers, who traditionally grow citrus, will have to make adaptations to their harvesting and handling procedures, he says.

Whether or not consumers agree with the UF scientists' positive expectations for the stone fruit will be determined with market research such as consumer acceptance taste-tests. *CVM*

UNIVERSITY OF
FLORIDA
IFAS EXTENSION

Robin Koestoyo is the media coordinator for the UF/IFAS Indian River Research and Education Center. She can be reached at koestoyo@ufl.edu.

Center Updates

Everglades Research and Education Center

Elise Pearlstine will be the featured speaker at the Friday Seminar at 10:45 a.m. on March 2. Pearlstine recently joined the EREC faculty as an assistant in wildlife ecology. She will present information about her research on the wildlife of the Everglades agricultural area.

Seminars are free and open to the public. For more information, contact the EREC at (561) 993-1500 or visit the Web site. <http://erec.ifas.ufl.edu>.

Gulf Coast Research and Education Center

The first Florida Ag Expo, hosted by the GCREC on Dec. 8-9, proved to be a one-stop resource for all that concerns Florida fruit and vegetable producers. Over 800 participants attended the two-day event, which included seminars, demonstrations, variety trials, and exhibits designed to help growers increase sales, lower costs, and maximize productivity. Charles Bronson, Florida agriculture commissioner, presided over the ribbon-cutting ceremony for a farmworker housing prototype supported by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The unit is on display at the GCREC and open to the public during regular business hours. Plans already are in the works for the 2007 expo. Details will be posted online.

<http://flagexpo.ifas.ufl.edu>.

North Florida Research and Education Center – Suwannee Valley

Winter care of the demonstration orchard includes pruning, dormant oil sprays, weed management and freeze protection with overhead irrigation. Hydroponic greenhouse trials include mini cucumber variety trial and fertility, media and IPM trials for growing organic herbs.

<http://nfredc-sv.ifas.ufl.edu/>

Southwest Florida Research and Education Center

A workshop on exotic citrus diseases not yet in Florida is set for Feb. 20, 10 a.m. to noon, at the SWFREC. The workshop will include information on leprosis, stem pitting, tristeza, black spot, and other diseases. To register, call (863) 674-4092.

<http://swfrec.ifas.ufl.edu>