

Posted on Tue, Aug. 22, 2006

## AGRICULTURE

# Rules tighten for citrus-tree growers

**Beginning in 2008, all Florida citrus trees will have to be grown in greenhouses. As farmers adjust to the regulation, they face new economic challenges.**

BY SUSAN SALISBURY

The Palm Beach Post

Florida's citrus nurseries are facing a little-known consequence from the failed 10-year campaign to wipe out canker -- tougher regulations for raising young orange, grapefruit and tangerine trees that will forever change a way of agricultural life.

About 90 percent of the state's nurseries grow citrus seedlings and trees outdoors. But beginning in 2008, the trees -- which supply Florida's citrus growers as well as enrich homeowners' back yards -- must be grown inside, in greenhouses built to specific standards that officials believe will reduce the threat of canker and citrus greening.

Florida agriculture officials say it's the only way to save the state's nurseries.

"If we do nothing and don't require this, they will all, 100 percent of them, go out of business," said Craig Meyer, deputy agriculture commissioner. "We are just trying to do our best to ensure there is a nursery industry in Florida."

By extension, the new rules are designed to save Florida's \$9 billion citrus industry as a whole.

Starting Jan. 1, any new citrus trees must be grown in a bug-proof screen structure, said Denise Feiber, a state Agriculture Department spokeswoman based in Gainesville. Nurseries can sell their existing open-field stock through the end of 2007, but by Jan. 1, 2008, all citrus trees must be in the greenhouses.

Existing nurseries are allowed to build the required structures in their present location even if they are next to a citrus grove, but those who relocate must be at least a mile from a grove, Feiber said.

Nursery owners say putting up the structures is simply too expensive, especially after the hurricanes of 2004 and 2005 wiped out trees across much of the state and drove some of them out of business.

Chuck Reed, owner of the 27-year-old Reed Bros. Citrus in Dundee, predicts that just 10 citrus nurseries out of the nearly 40 in Florida will still be selling trees by the end of 2007. He said erecting a greenhouse away from a citrus area to grow 250,000 trees would cost \$2.5 million.

"The regulations are shutting us down," said Reed, 49. "You can argue all day long whether the regulations are right or wrong, but the nurseryman is expected to comply."

Without some financial assistance in putting up the greenhouses, there will be shortages of fruit trees for farmers and homeowners, the nursery growers say. The state says that's to be expected anyway because of eradication and hurricanes.

Large growers, such as Southern Gardens Citrus in Hendry County, are considering starting their own nurseries, Reed said. It will be the smaller and midsize growers who won't have access to trees.

Mark Philmon's citrus nursery is in a Tampa Bay-area county that has never had any reported cases of citrus canker. But by the end of 2007, he expects to shut down his family's 60-year-old business because of the threat of the bacterial disease.

Philmon, 47, believes some nurseries will stay in business, but trees will be more costly.

"It will be a monopoly. Then they can get the price," he said.

For many nursery owners, there's too much uncertainty about the impact of the various citrus diseases and the industry's future to make a definite decision. The end of the canker eradication program in January marked the start of a new era of living with canker, as growers learn how to manage the disease.

Greg Holmberg, who runs the 40-acre Holmberg Farms nursery in Lithia, said he seriously is considering building the greenhouses, but he thinks the state Agriculture Department is working against him by telling homeowners to plant something besides citrus. He'd rather see state officials tell consumers to spray their citrus trees.

Holmberg has raised prices 40 percent to try to finance the greenhouses and see whether the market will bear higher-priced trees. So far, his sales have decreased 30 percent.

"The problem is whether or not sales will justify the capital investment," he said.