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AGRICULTURE

Nurseries scramble for plants as demand for citrus trees soars

Since the state's canker eradication program ended in January, a huge demand for fruit-bearing trees has created shortages throughout Florida.

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Nurseries scramble for plants as citrus-tree demand soars

Ventura Gonzalez of Miami longs for the day he can once again pluck a lemon or bittersweet orange from a tree in his back yard and use it to flavor the Cuban dishes his family enjoys.

Gonzalez was in Fort Pierce recently checking out the citrus trees for sale at Nelson Family Farms on Midway Road. He lost his trees to the citrus canker eradication program several years ago.

"Is it legal to plant again?" he asked, eyeing the tangerine, ruby red grapefruit and other trees priced at \$39.95 for a 7-gallon tub. His niece, Terri Ribeiraud, assured him planting citrus in areas where it was eradicated is once again permitted.

Just about everybody in Ribeiraud's family, from Miami to Fort Pierce, is buying citrus trees to replace those taken during the state's failed canker eradication effort, which ended in January after 10 years.

"It started with my brother-in-law. Then my dad saw his trees, and bought a lemon tree here," Ribeiraud said. "It has spread through word of mouth."

REPLANTING TREES

It's a phenomenon that's occurring all over the citrus zone as people begin to replant the once banned trees. When the quarantine was lifted in February, allowing the planting of citrus everywhere in the state, pent-up demand was unleashed.

While some businesses selling citrus trees, such as Nelson's, never were in a quarantine zone, others were. Trees are beginning to trickle into those stores, including Home Depot and Lowe's stores throughout South Florida.

A clerk at Home Depot on State Road 7 in Royal Palm Beach said that when a new shipment of orange, lemon, and tangerine trees priced from \$39 to \$159 arrived recently, customers were snatching them up as they were being unloaded.

Independent nurseries with trees include A1A Citrus Nursery & Landscape and Fruit Trees Only, both in Loxahatchee, and Roadside Nursery in Okeechobee.

"Many places from Gainesville to the Keys have stock right now," said Denise Feiber, spokeswoman for the Florida Department of Agriculture. "We are recommending they call ahead."

Dan Nelson, president of Nelson's, a citrus fruit, juice and produce business founded in 1945, has been selling citrus trees for the past eight years.

"Sales of citrus trees jumped by 1,000 percent from January to February," Nelson said. "We have customers in here from the Keys."

Nelson doesn't expect to run out any time soon, but statewide, a shortage of residential trees is looming. For commercial growers, who buy them by the thousands, it's already a reality.

COMMERCIAL SHORTAGE

"Homeowners can get trees, but the supply is running short," said Phillip Rucks, owner of Rucks Nursery in Frostproof. "There is a big shortage for commercial growers, with a 2-million-tree deficit this year and probably next year."

The nurseries are attempting to step up production, but at the same time are worried about new state regulations that will require them to have a secure greenhouse by Jan. 1, 2008. The details are still being debated.

While growers want to provide clean, disease-free trees, regulations that are too onerous and expensive, such as requiring them to have even larger trees in bug-proof greenhouses, could put them out of business, they say.

Greg Holmberg, owner of Holmberg's Citrus Nursery in Lithia, said he's already increased his prices by 40 percent and he hopes that will be sufficient to cover the cost of the greenhouses. If complying with the regulations becomes too cost-prohibitive, Holmberg predicts an underground tree industry will spring up.

"It will be just like Prohibition. People will take buds off someone else's trees or bring it from China or Cuba," he said. "There will be bootleg citrus."