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## AGRICULTURE

# Grapefruit was looking up, until Wilma brought it down

**Hurricane damage to this year's grapefruit crop was just as bad or worse than damage caused by storms in 2004.**

BY SUSAN SALISBURY

The Palm Beach Post

It might be hard to imagine these days, but Florida's agriculture industry was struggling with a glut of grapefruit not so long ago.

Then came the hurricanes of 2004, which sliced the crop down to levels not seen since the harvest of 1935-36.

Things were looking better for 2005, with a crop of 24 million boxes -- roughly double that of the previous harvest -- predicted in September.

But Hurricane Wilma has made this season a repeat of the last, as the storm knocked at least half of the harvest onto the ground.

In hard-hit Palm Beach and Martin counties, heavy grapefruit blew off the trees more readily than oranges or tangerines.

## AS BAD OR WORSE

"We probably had a quarter of a million boxes [of grapefruit] on the trees and lost 85 to 90 percent of it," said Mark DuBois, operations manager at Callery-Judge Grove near Loxahatchee. "It's as bad or worse than last year."

In normal years, Callery-Judge usually produced more than 300,000 85-pound boxes of grapefruit that typically sold for \$8 to \$10 each, DuBois said.

In St. Lucie County, Wilma's winds blew 57 percent of the grapefruit from the trees, based on a grower survey, said Jack Hebb, a Fort Pierce-based citrus agent with the University of Florida Cooperative Extension Service.

"Not all of that has dropped, yet. You wonder how much has been scarred up," Hebb said.

Japan, the primary destination for the juicy grapefruit for which the Indian River region is celebrated, usually wants cosmetically perfect fruit but probably will accept a slightly lower grade than in the past, Hebb said.

Reduced supply will mean higher prices for the fruit.

G.T. Parris, who handles North American sales at fruit shipper Greene River Marketing in Vero Beach, said right now, a 40-pound box of grapefruit is going for \$18, compared with \$10 to \$11 in non-hurricane years.

## THERE WILL BE FRUIT

Parris is reassuring customers nationwide that they will be able to obtain the fruit they want, he said.

"We're shipping. We still have fruit," Parris said. "We lost 30 to 40 percent of the crop we had going into the season."

The shrunken supply will mean steadier prices for farmers, DuBois said.

"If you have grapefruit, you can make a little money," he said.

Richard Kinney, executive vice president of Florida Citrus Packers in Lakeland, summed up the 2005-06 season's outlook: "There will be high demand and not enough supply and a high price structure. You will see higher prices at retail."

The citrus industry also has taken a body blow from the canker epidemic, a bacterial invasion that has been infecting fruit trees for 10 years. During the past year, almost 3 million commercial citrus trees of all varieties have been destroyed or are slated to be removed in Indian River, St. Lucie, Martin and Palm Beach counties, according to Florida Department of Agriculture data.

Canker, plus the newly discovered threat of the disease called citrus greening, will drive some people out of the business, Parris said.

"When it is all said and done this year, you will have more people fall out," he said. "Between that and development, they will make up their minds sooner. If a grower has been offered money by a developer, I don't blame him."

With another hard harvest year, every surviving grapefruit grown on "the river" is highly prized and needed, said Doug Bournique, executive vice president of the Indian River Citrus League.

"The crop that is left is going to be in high demand," Bournique said. "The internal quality is excellent. It is good eating fruit this year."

"We need more of it," he said. "It's going to be another difficult year."