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Crops take a hit; losses are tallied

Floating plants, damaged shade houses, uprooted trees, and a devastated avocado harvest is Katrina's legacy in South Dade nurseries and groves.

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Hurricane Katrina's unexpected jog south caught South Miami-Dade nurseries and groves unprepared, and growers awoke Friday to find fallen shade houses, uprooted plants, a destroyed avocado crop and extensive damage to foliage and landscaping plants.

Most row crop growers were spared because farmers don't plant winter crops such as tomatoes for another month. But Homestead's extensive fruit groves and avocado harvest were hit hard by the hurricane.

"We have been here since daylight picking stuff up," said Robbie Bishop of 27 Farms of Homestead. Avocados carpeted the ground around his avocado trees. Bishop said most of his avocado crop had been blown down or damaged in the storm.

Florida Agriculture and Consumer Services Commissioner Charles H. Bronson and other state and federal officials plan to tour the hard-hit area Tuesday. But Bronson said it would be several days before his department or the U.S. Department of Agriculture could estimate damages to Miami-Dade's \$400 million nursery industry.

Bill Hunt, president of the Dade Chapter of the Florida Nurserymen, Growers and Landscape Association, predicted a 40 percent loss in landscape and foliage plants but said it would take several weeks to tally up the final losses.

Farmers' problems were exacerbated because brimming canals flowed west, failing to drain flood waters and posing a soggy threat to plants.

Flood management planners had only expected nine inches of rainfall with Katrina. The 16 inches of precipitation that fell in South Dade meant canals were overwhelmed.

"I haven't seen a canal down here that isn't totally flooded," said Charles LaPradd, Miami-Dade agricultural manager. "I saw a canal that was flowing west instead of east."

Katie Edwards, executive director of the Dade County Farm Bureau, said it will be critical to drain flood waters as soon as possible since root rot sets in within 36 hours.

"It's never been this bad," Edwards said. "I can't even walk outside my door because of the flooding."

Nursery owner Gus Pena was out surveying his property Friday afternoon. He found bent and shredded shade houses, hundreds of pots bobbing in the flood waters and thousands of overturned sheffleras, draceanas and Croton Petras.

"We didn't expect this kind of damage," said Pena.

Because Hurricane Katrina's path was expected to be more northerly and only a Category 1 hurricane, many in the South Dade agriculture industry didn't take customary precautions such as taking down shade cloths and putting pots away.

Still, after 35 years in the business, Pena said he had a bad feeling and braved heavy winds, rain and his

wife's concerns to venture out at 12:30 a.m. "I came back out at 4:30 and came back at 5:30; we watched the sun come up," said Pena.

Pena and his brother and partner Tom grow indoor plants that are sold at Home Depot stores around the country. He estimated he has \$1 million in shade houses and \$2 million to \$3 million worth of plants at his nursery.

Some of the house plants -- which must be undamaged to be sold -- can be saved. But many will be lost. Federal crop insurance can help pay for the damages, but only after the owners pay a deductible of half a million dollars.

Bob Fuchs, the owner of R.F. Orchids in Homestead, lost the covering on all but one of his orchid houses.

"We didn't put anything away because we thought the storm would go north," Fuchs said. But by midday Friday, he and workers had managed to tape the covering back together, he said.

Another storm casualty was the plant show of the Dade Chapter of the Florida Nurserymen, Growers and Landscape Association. Scheduled for this weekend at the Coconut Grove Exhibition Center, the show was canceled after the hurricane damaged the exhibition hall and cut power.

Hunt, president of the Dade Chapter, said 94 exhibitors had been scheduled to display plants to garden centers, landscapers and, on Saturday, to the public.