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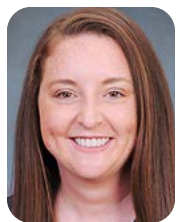
Volume 10 • Issue 3 | May 2021

TRI-COUNTY AGRICULTURAL AREA PRODUCTION



Pictured is ELDP Class 10 with U.S. Rep. Kat Cammack, FFVA Board Member Adam Lytch and ELDP Alum Johnny Lunsford (Class 9).

L&M helps organize look at production in TCAA



By **Michelle Hayes**
Corteva Agriscience

Adam Lytch, operations manager at L&M Farms, was pivotal in Class 10's tour of the Tri-County Agricultural Area (TCAA), a first for the ELDP program. His hospitality was first class. One of the stops we were able to make was at the L&M packinghouse in East Palatka. Lytch shared with us the background of L&M, its geography in farms, its relationship with partner growers, and the 13 types of vegetables grown. He also shared with us the number of challenges that growers in the area face between labor, water issues, the changing demands of buyers, and of course, Mother Nature.

We also heard about the Farmers to Families Food Box Program that L&M has participated in this last year. The program is part of the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program (CFAP) administered by the USDA and is designed to help American farmers and families impacted by COVID-19. It connects distributors with nonprofit organizations who can support delivering food to those in need. While visiting the packinghouse, we were able to see L&M assemble these boxes. The boxes have a variety of fresh produce that will ultimately end up in Florida food banks. As of January 2021, there have been 132 million boxes that have been distributed throughout the U.S. as part of this program.

Editor's Note: In mid-April, the USDA announced an end to the food box program and rolled out a new initiative in its place that will run through The Emergency Food Assistance Program.

CONTENTS

For Smith Farms, farming is a family tradition 2

Tater Farms adapts, diversifies 3

Comarco Products leads with performance, not promises 4

Surviving and thriving with Danny Johns at Blue Sky Farms 5

Tradition runs deep at L&M Farms 6

Sykes Family Farm puts the spotlight on agritourism 7

Local commissioner shares importance of advocacy 7

UF research farm offers new opportunities 8

U.S. Rep. Cammack on public service path 9

DeLee Produce building a foundation in Florida 9

The history of Hastings: Florida's potato capital 10



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For Smith Farms, farming is a family tradition



By **Sherri Atwell**
Feeding Florida

The first of the grower stops for the Tri-County Agricultural Area was Smith Farms. We were greeted by Lance Smith and his daughter, Tara Smith Vighetti. Working alongside parents and siblings is nothing new for this sixth-generation farm where the family grows and markets broccoli, cauliflower and potatoes. As they gave us the tour, we learned how the company

began growing in Maine back in 1859. In an effort to capture more of the eastern U.S. market, they began partner growing in Northeast Florida and harvested their first winter crop in 1999.

We had the opportunity to see the full cycle from the field, to the packinghouse and to the end customer, which is predominately chain stores. We rode out into the field and were welcomed by the distinct smell of a broccoli harvest. We saw the crews hand harvesting the broccoli which was the first pass of what may be two to three passes for the season. Vighetti and her father mentioned the biggest challenge in farming these days is the lack of labor

and how expensive the labor they have continues to be. As we toured the packinghouse, we got to see how the broccoli and cauliflower come in from the fields, are forced-air cooled and are then sent to the production line for shrink wrapping or out to be iced with the ice maker that generates 200 tons of ice every 24 hours.

As we wrapped up the tour, I asked Vighetti what the challenges were with working in a family owned business. Her simple reply was, "We all love it. We each have our own lanes, and we do them well." This response embodies the humble pride felt as we walked and enjoyed their family farm.



Tater Farms adapts, diversifies



By **Ariel Bauer**
Hardee Fresh LLC

The Tri-County Agricultural Area is well known for the potatoes grown there, so I was surprised to arrive at Tater Farms LLC and not see a single potato! This farm had grown potatoes and cabbage since its start in the 1970s but has continually diversified until it finally moved out of the potato business in 2011. Today, turfgrass and sod are Tater Farms' 'bread and butter' but citrus is on the horizon.

Growing 2,600 acres of improved sod and turfgrass, the perfectly manicured green grass fields seem to go on forever. What sets Tater Farms' sod operation apart from others is its ability to adapt. There are continual plot trials being grown here to ensure they are growing the best varieties available. They also turned to drain tile irrigation on most of their fields to decrease water and fertilizer use. Perhaps the greatest improvement to the operation is their use of automation to decrease labor needs. Since 2014, Tater Farms has utilized automated harvesters that require just one operator, allowing for up to 18 pallets of sod to be harvested every day, 365 days a year. Another timesaver is the automated tarping system used on each semi-truck trailer. This system saves truck drivers an hour of rolling and unrolling tarps over sod pallets by using a motor to roll up the sides of each trailer. These measures have been the cause of great success in the sod industry.

Tater Farms has also started a new project in the citrus industry. Currently, Tater Farms has around 80 acres of beautiful juvenile tangerine trees with plans to



expand. Their trees are showing less than 1% of greening incidence, picking 40 boxes an acre at just 32 months old. They believe their isolation from other citrus groves is the key to limiting the effects of greening in Florida.

The time spent at Tater Farms was full of questions answered along with an insightful lunch on the farm. Thank you to Eric Hjort, Carleton Johns, Jake and Kelly Brown, and Polly Johns for showing ELDP such an impressive operation.

Comarco Products leads with performance, not promises



By **Frederico Boscolo**
Cultiva Farms USA

What's better than eggplant? Fried eggplant! And at Comarco Products, where 50,000 pounds per week of fresh eggplant is processed, they know this pretty well.

This family business is focused on production of breaded appetizers for the foodservice industry and recently is redirecting resources (due to the pandemic) to the retail sector. The vision is to be the best partner or co-packer for big private labels and brands. Tom Hoversen is the president of the company. The new generation is well represented by his son Eric (CFO) and daughter Kelly

(production and procurements).

Originally from New Jersey, the Hoversens decided to move to Florida to expand the business, gain production efficiencies with a bigger plant and to be close to the Florida grower partners that supply fresh product nine months out of the year.

The Palatka plant smells of positivity, a result of the involvement of local authorities in the site selection and development, state-of-the-art machineries, and clean environment where food safety attention is closely adhered to.

Technology, innovation and food safety are all important things, but they are nothing if not managed by the right people. Here is where the ELDP group could see the difference. The real value added by this company is the people and the company culture that bonds all these great ingredients.

As Hoversen's words resonate, "Team, culture, cycle," it all goes back to professional and genuine relationships with collaborators, customers and growers.

A great work environment creates the right ecosystem to develop innovation, and at Comarco, they are proving to be at the cutting edge. The latest product ready to launch is the "Veggie Bacon." Made with eggplants, the product is a unique "tornado of taste" but with 38% less calories, 22% less fat and 54% less sodium compared to regular bacon.

As Comarco says, "Performance, not promises."





Surviving and thriving with Danny Johns at Blue Sky Farms



By **Sasha Burgin**
Burgin Farms

Fourth-generation potato farmer Danny Johns of Blue Sky Farms spoke to ELDP Class 10 about his history in agriculture and how to survive and thrive in the always changing industry. Blue Sky currently grows 400 acres of table-stock potatoes including red, white, yellow, creamers and purple fingerling potatoes.

Danny explained to us that the best way to get started is to start small and grow. He said to us, “whenever you stretch, stretch a little bit more.” We learned just how precious farmers and food producers truly are. Danny

explained to us that less than 2% of the population is what feeds the other 98%. He made it clear that farming can be tough but that “survival is a must and failure is not an option.” Danny also explained that farming is as much art as it is science and that when possible, farmers should keep an open mind as the industry and technology are always changing and advancing.

We also got a tour of the potato packinghouse and potato field. Danny explained to us how tile drain irrigation works along with subsurface terrace. We got to see nearly ready purple and white potatoes straight from the dirt. We also learned that Florida is the second largest potato producer in the United States.

Our farmers are a true fount of knowledge and wisdom having dealt with so many trials throughout their farm days. My favorite days are spent in the field learning from farmers, and I am glad to be the next generation on the farm.



Tradition runs deep at L&M Farms



By **Sarah Hillard**
A. Duda & Sons

As Larry Corn, farm manager for L&M Farms, began to talk about the land in Palatka that he farms today, he nostalgically mentioned that this is the same land that his dad farmed. Having these strong ties to his community, it is with pride that Larry talks about the many advancements in farming practices. He continued to talk about the innovations in irrigation and technology that have allowed them to continue to supply high quality produce to their customers. The tile irrigation system that is used allows them to control the water level and keep nutrients high.

Other new technology allows well control from a remote device and even alerts you when a well should be turned on or off. Both of these solutions help to reduce water waste. One of the most interesting developments is being able to determine nutrient levels on a grid from overhead so that each area can have customized fertilizer applications. This precision agriculture allows L&M Farms to improve its effectiveness and efficiency.

In Palatka and surrounding areas, the

main crops grown are potatoes, cabbage, broccoli and greens. But there are seasonal crops like green beans that are grown to meet the Thanksgiving demand. With a focus on customers' needs, most of the planting is based on staggering the variety maturity to provide a consistent supply throughout the year.

Tradition runs deep at L&M Farms, and Operations Manager Adam Lytch emphasized the importance of their partnerships with local farms. L&M provides the seed, plants and harvesting crews for these local farms. The relationship extends past farming into other areas of support, including packaging, sales, marketing and distribution. This diverse business continues to grow and focus on providing the best tasting produce to fit customers' needs. And a special thanks to Adam Lytch for providing a great lunch in L&M's new addition to its packinghouse!





Sykes Family Farm puts the spotlight on agritourism

Just a short ride from St. Augustine lies Sykes Family Farm. It is here that fifth-generation farmer John Sykes grows over 20 different types of Asian vegetables on approximately 2,600 acres. John has found his niche in Asian vegetables, growing them for the last 10 years or so. Unfortunately, Mexico has caught on and continues to threaten the prices Sykes receives, and in turn, his livelihood. Growing so many specialized vegetable varieties definitely has its challenges, ranging from stricter nutrient management regulations to specialized harvest crews that demand top dollar, that is no match to wages in Mexico.

To combat these challenges, Sykes Family Farms has begun to transition into the agritourism sector of the industry. Agritourism puts Sykes Family Farms at the crossroads of agriculture, allowing him to do what he has grown up doing while entering into the tourism industry.

Come to the farm in the month of October, and you will be thrown into a corn maze with concerts, food trucks and bounce pillows while witnessing where the farm fades into fun. People come far and wide to walk through the fruits of his labor, a pre-designed maze planted with the latest and greatest design. John sees this endeavor as his future, and plans to eventually transition out of vegetable farming and into full-time agritourism where he can educate consumers that the food they purchase does not just appear out of the back of your local grocery store.



By **Shane Mart**
H&A Farms

Local commissioner shares importance of advocacy

During ELDP's third session, St. Johns County Commissioner Jeb Smith spoke to Class 10 about the importance of engaging with local government. After all, it is local – not state or



By **Nathan Carson**
Chemical
Dynamics, Inc.

federal – government that has the greatest impact on our daily lives. Whether it is property taxes, school systems, zoning rules, road maintenance, police departments or emergency services, these all fall under the purview of city and county government.

One of the challenges that local governments face is too many new arrivals to Florida appreciate the scenery of rural areas but openly loathe the production agriculture. For instance, Commissioner Smith shared the anecdote of a new resident from New England complaining about the noise generated from farm equipment in the early morning. Another new resident complained about tractors on the road. Due to this lack of industry understanding, it is crucial for Florida agriculture to remain engaged with both local officials as well as the general public by educating them on the realities of farming. Otherwise, there is the risk that local officials may enact rules that are detrimental to the industry.

Commissioner Smith also spoke of his initial motivation for running for county commissioner. Although approached by several close friends about running, Smith remained on the fence. What changed Smith's mind was a piece of advice from a mentor: "Remember, someone will occupy that seat." It was the realization of "If someone has to occupy the seat, why not me?" that drove Smith to serve as county commissioner. This civic understanding underscores the reality that love it or hate it, politics influences our lives in powerful ways. As a result, it is up to us as responsible citizens to stay engaged with the political process at the local level.



UF research farm offers new opportunities



By **Eric Greenhow**
Optimum Equity Partners

During our most recent North Florida production trip, Class 10 was fortunate to hear from Dr. Chris Christensen and other experts about the various studies and crops underway at the University of Florida/IFAS Agricultural Extension Center and research farm in Hastings.

With the majority of farming in the St. Johns County area being potatoes, and a large amount of that production being sold to Lay's, profit margins for growers have been slimming over time. Therefore, the UF/IFAS Extension Center is experimenting with new crops that have the potential to thrive in that climate, offering other opportunities to local farmers.

The center is in its fourth year of artichoke trials to find varieties that can be grown successfully in the region, and



are specifically targeting the fresh market. Approximately 99% of U.S. artichoke production at this time comes from California, so finding a type of artichoke that could grow well here may open a new market. Using transplants, they started planting in November, and will finish harvesting sometime in April. During the initial harvest, the experts at UF/IFAS expect to get five to seven large buds per plant, with subsequent harvests yielding several smaller

buds. Artichokes can be grown as perennials in parts of northern California, but in Florida, the summer heat causes the plants to die off, so they will need to be replanted annually. Weeds and stink bugs have proven to be the biggest challenges with artichoke production so far. If you've never seen an artichoke bloom, I'd recommend looking it up! They generate a unique-looking, vivid flower.



In addition to artichokes, the center is also experimenting with seven to eight different varieties of sweet corn, hoping to narrow those down to three or four that they can ultimately recommend local farmers begin growing. The sweet corn was just planted in mid-March, and with a growing season of 70 to 80 days, they expect to harvest the corn in late-May. Growers in the Hastings area, and in all of Florida for that matter, are fortunate to have the ongoing studies and expertise of the UF/IFAS researchers to aid in the continually evolving science of new crop implementation and design.





U.S. Rep. Cammack on public service path

As I looked over the schedule for Class 10's production trip to the TCAA, I was pleasantly surprised to see we would get to visit with U.S. Rep. Kat Cammack. I had recently watched her give testimony on the Farmers to Families Food Box Program and that led me to want to learn more about where she came from and her agenda.



By **Jennifer Schaal**
Dundee Citrus Growers Association

As we stood in the newly renovated office of L&M Farms in Palatka, Cammack told us about her path to public service. Her intention was never to be a politician; she wanted to continue operating the family cattle ranch after college. Due to complications with the Federal Home Affordable Modification Program, her family lost their cattle ranch and became homeless. It was through this experience that her desire to enter politics arose.

Cammack has often been quoted saying, "go big or go home," and this time, she went BIG! Not only is Cammack currently the youngest Republican woman in Congress, as a freshman she serves on the House Homeland Security Committee and is the only Florida Republican to serve on the House Agriculture Committee. She has also been appointed to several subcommittees of both.

Cammack is very passionate about agriculture; she understands the importance of supporting Florida producers and is dedicated to protecting their interests. She truly takes the time to get to know producers by visiting their operations and learning about their struggles firsthand. Take a peek at her Facebook or Twitter account, and you'll see exactly where she has been. She is putting names to faces and taking the issues to the table for all of Florida agriculture.



DeLee Produce building a foundation in Florida

Class 10 got to meet summer Northerner turned winter

Floridian Dan Corey on its inaugural trip to the Tri-County Agricultural Area (TCAA). The connections from Maine and other areas of the Northeast to the agricultural world of Northeast Florida were very interesting to learn about, and DeLee Produce was another of those stories.

With many years under his belt as a seed potato farmer in Maine, he was able to bring his expertise and farming mind to Molasses Junction and begin growing about 300 acres of table-stock potatoes and some broccoli. Like many in the TCAA, Corey has built a great relationship with L&M and gave them a lot of credit for getting him to the area. Through the history of Corey supplying seed potatoes to many L&M growers, as well as other potato growers all over the Southeast, he built a foundation for a farming opportunity in Florida, and it is something Corey has enjoyed.

With his children getting their shot at running the operation in Maine, Corey is making some gutsy moves with early planting and is excited about the market window he can hit with table-stock potatoes, about two weeks before others in Florida. If there is anyone that can do it, even with the biblical insects that Florida has to offer, it is Dan Corey.



By **Kelly Smekens Bonduelle**
Fresh Americas

The history of Hastings: Florida's potato capital



By **Morgan Stuckert**
Lipman Family Farms

Our trip to Hastings was a memorable one – and we kicked it off with candid stories and recollections from Danny Byrnes, generational owner of Byrnes Farms, over breakfast.

The town was originally recognized for its positioning on the St. John's River. This created a great tourist attraction to the town, with a strong presence between the 1860s and 1890s.

As the town attracted travelers, it enticed Henry Flagler to build a hotel, Ponce De Leon, in St. Augustine and later invite his distant cousin, Thomas Horace Hastings, to assist him in developing a railroad system and agriculture fields nearby. Hastings led the growth of vegetables, both field and greenhouse grown, across thousands of acres of land in Palatka.

This growth eventually led agriculture to dominate the town, with potatoes being the most popular crop.

One interesting story told by Byrnes focused on Federal Point, originally known as "DuPont's Landing." This plot of land sits west by the St. John's River where the wind patterns make this area warmer than the rest of town by several degrees.

Eventually this plot of land was bought by Byrnes Farms, where Danny Byrnes and his team grow their potatoes today. This provides the growers a

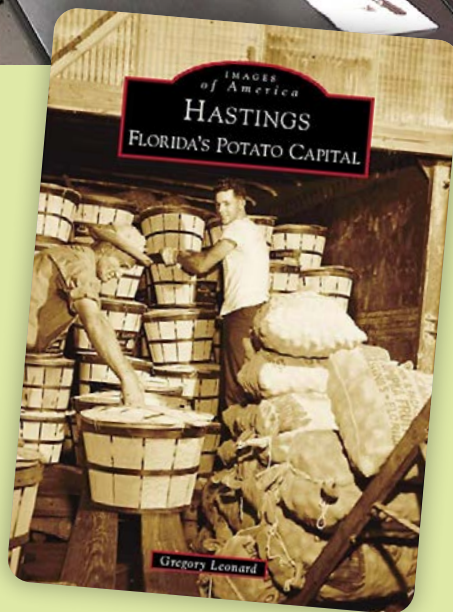


unique competitive advantage with the ability to be first to market each season with warmer temperatures than their neighboring acres.

Danny Byrnes also shared his life in Hastings and growing up learning the family potato business, eventually taking it on fully in 1972.

Byrnes Farms grows strictly table-stock potatoes (versus chip potatoes) for distribution to its customers. They are one of approximately seven growers that grow strictly table stock, with most growers focusing on potatoes for potato chip processing.

After a hearty diner breakfast and even more robust conversations, Danny Byrnes was generous enough to offer each class member a book of Hastings history, full of *Images of America* photographs of early residents, neighborhoods and vegetable fields.



**Thank you to
FFVA Board Member Adam Lytch
for sponsoring
Class 10's breakfast.**