

EMERGING TIMES

...growing toward the future

Volume 11 • Issue 3 | April 2022

HILLSBOROUGH AND POLK COUNTIES



CONTENTS

TradeMark Nitrogen shines after six decades 2

Lipman Family Farms: An industry leader 3

The Pixie Way 4

Innovating to combat greening 5

RCMA impactful for Florida's migrant families 6

Finding the perfect berry lineup 7

Southern Citrus Nursery continues expansion of hydroponic production 8

Dundee packing facility taking shape in an ever-changing market 9

Wheeler Farms finds value in peach production 10

Dun-D's long tradition of supporting Florida citrus growers 11

Continuing tradition with Fancy Farms 12

It takes a team to grow a berry 13

Florida Strawberry Growers: An association with impact 14

ELDP news 15



In February, Class 11 of FFVA's Emerging Leader Development Program toured several farm operations in Hillsborough and Polk counties to learn about production practices for a variety of crops, including blueberries, citrus, peaches, raspberries, strawberries and tomatoes.

Class members heard from FFVA board members and others on the many challenges facing growers, including plant disease and labor, as well as the opportunities surrounding innovation, from new crop varieties to the Citrus Under Protective Screen (CUPS) project.

During the visit, the class delivered in-kind donations collected as part of the ELDP Class 11 Food Drive to support RCMA in Dover.

Pictured above is Class 11 at Dundee Citrus Growers Association with (from left) COO Greg Dunnahoe, CEO Steven Callaham, CFO Jennifer Schaal and VP of Purchasing, Safety and Compliance John Marshall.



SUSTAINING SPONSOR



TradeMark Nitrogen shines after six decades



By **David Wheeler Jr.**
Wheeler Farms, Inc.

TradeMark Nitrogen was the first stop of the day for Class 11 as it began the Hillsborough/Polk production trip. A quick breakfast was generously provided by TradeMark Nitrogen, while the class was given an overview and background of the company and what would be seen along the tour. Centrally located in Tampa, TradeMark Nitrogen is a manufacturer and distributor of agricultural and industrial products for different uses around the world. The original facility was built in 1959 and has since gone through several key changes that have included

different owners and structural additions. All the while, it is still running strong.

The facility is very active, with a lot of traffic coming and going. The key component materials are brought into the plant via rail, port and bulk trucking. A large scale sits at the front entrance to help monitor these materials. The materials are needed to operate a nitric acid and ammonium nitrate solution manufacturing facility that runs 24/7 every day of the year. Hard hats and yellow safety vests were required as everyone split up into several small groups. A large generator that powered operations for many years before being retired is a reminder of how far the company has come. Numerous storage tanks and mixing equipment was present throughout the facility. The materials and products that are produced in this facility are vital to



agricultural production. Without fertilizer (a key component of which is nitrogen), it would be difficult to feed crops to enable growth. Given the opportunity to get a behind-the-scenes look at TradeMark Nitrogen was an amazing experience.

Lipman Family Farms: An industry leader

From precision bed preparation and drip irrigation installation to plastic laying, transplanting and staking – these are just the very first steps in what is the intensive and challenging process of tomato production. For more than 80 years, Immokalee-based Lipman Family Farms has been up to this challenge. From humble beginnings as a small family company to now a multi-state operation with over 9,000 acres in production, Lipman Family Farms is the largest producer of field-grown tomatoes in North America.



By **Jake Rothert**
Rothert Farm Inc.

ELDP Class 11 was given the opportunity to tour one of Lipman's farms in Duette with Wayne Heller, sustainability and IPM manager. Heller gave his insights on the production process and what Lipman is doing to maintain its status as an industry leader. For example, the fields we visited used a dual-color plastic mulch vs. more typical single-color plastic mulch. The dual color is mostly a reflective material with a thin strip of black around the plant. The reflective material disorients and confuses unwanted insects from attacking the growing tomato plants, while the thin black strip around the plant traps heat for more vigorous growth for the warm-weather loving crop. Another interesting innovation is the adaptation of fiberglass stakes, replacing the standard wooden stakes of the past. These provide both better handling characteristics and 10 times the working life of the grower-standard wooden stakes.

Heller also touched on the opportunities and challenges the Florida tomato industry faces. With both cheap foreign imports and the increasing number of acres moving to greenhouses, Florida tomato growers find themselves in a defensive position. However, Florida's reputation for taste and quality stands at the forefront of customers' minds. This, in combination with its geographical advantage of being closer to major markets, will give Florida a leg up on the competition and propel growers into the future.





The Pixie Way



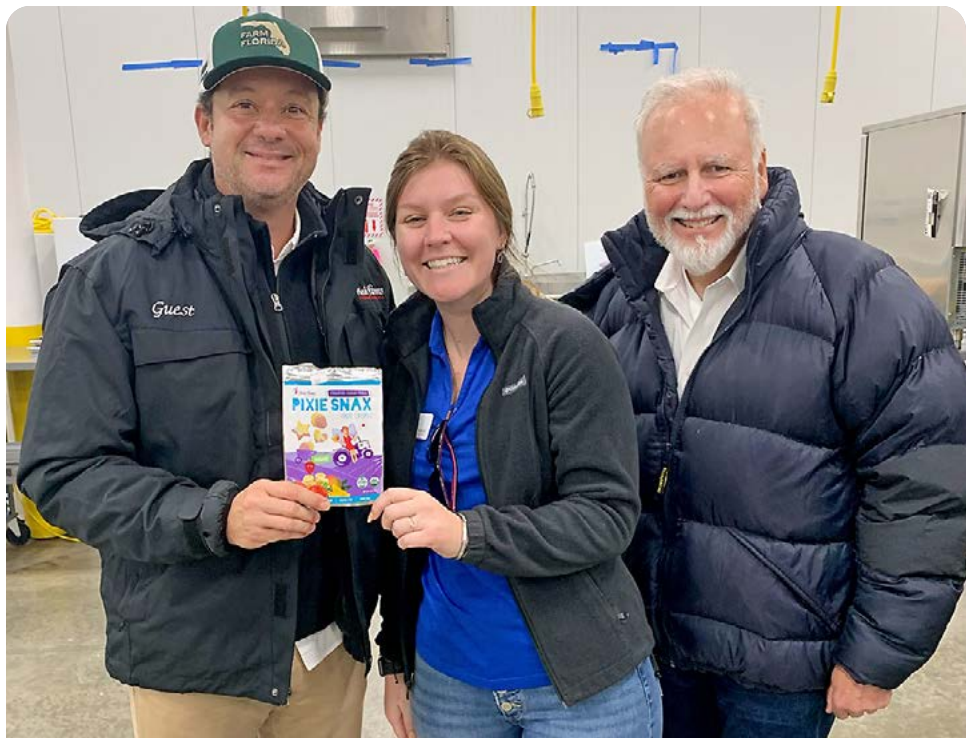
By **Charlie Hurst**
PGIM Real Estate

During Class 11's tour of Wish Farms, Gary Wishnatzki and his band of Pixies exemplified the Pixie Way, which at its core emphasizes quality, integrity and responsiveness. This focus and dedication were evident in every facet of the operation. Wish Farms' goal to provide the best-tasting berries – while making a difference in the lives of its employees, community, and customers – is imbedded in its unique culture and showed from the time we walked through the mystical doors, to the clean-enough-to-eat-off berry cooler floors.

While on tour, Wishnatzki and Amber Maloney, director of marketing, were gracious enough to walk us through the berry compound, including the newly designed office, boasting ample office

and communal spaces, an in-house chef and kitchen, full gym, custom-designed tree house and even a whimsical slide to bring out the inner child in everyone that works or tours. But just because they keep things fun, doesn't mean they have compromised the hard work and values that continue to move them forward.

A revamped berry packing and cooling facility, located on the same property, boasts state-of-the-art packing lines for berries, industry-leading coolers and technology, and some of the best people responsible for the day-to-day work that makes Wish Farms an industry leader. As the tour concluded, our class was lucky enough to taste and take home some delicious pineberries (the champagne of strawberries, or so we've been told). These are just the latest of new varieties and products Wish has entering the marketplace, hoping to sprinkle some Pixie Dust (berries) into every home they can in hopes that everyone "Eats Berries, Feels Good, and Makes a Difference".



Innovating to combat greening



By **Carisa Keller**
Alico Inc.

Over the years, due to citrus greening, we have seen the citrus industry slowly start to decline. Growers have been scrambling to find a method or alternative they can use to save the industry. While some are turning to changing crops or selling land for development, Dundee Citrus Growers Association (Dundee) had an idea. As most of us know, once a citrus tree is planted in the ground, it will ultimately be infected. Through strategic

planning and out-of-the-box ideas, Dundee was able to create a different type of environment to grow trees. This is what started the C.U.P.S. project (Citrus Under Protective Screen). They decided to completely screen over 10-acre blocks of citrus groves, thus limiting the number of psyllids that would be able to get in and infect the trees.

While it doesn't solve the greening problem completely, it does help give the trees a better chance. A few additional benefits of the C.U.P.S. growing system include using fewer pesticides, less water and production of better-quality fruit, with a sweeter taste. From this one idea, they have been able to expand their operation by building more 10-acre blocks and allowing

stakeholders and growers in the industry to be involved. The types of trees typically planted are the fresh varieties, such as grapefruit. They plant dwarf-like trees, so they don't grow higher than the poles supporting the screens. During our Polk/Hillsborough County trip, we were able to meet many growers throughout both counties. At one point or another, we all face the same challenges. But at the end of the day, we all have the same goal – to continue growing the highest quality produce to help feed the world. It is encouraging as a young person to see innovative growers focused on creating a better world for the industry. I look forward to seeing where this journey takes them in the future.



RCMA impactful for Florida's migrant families



By **Jake Rothert**
Rothert Farm Inc.

Since 1965, RCMA has been filling the vital need for childcare in Florida's farming communities. Originally starting with just two locations, RCMA has since expanded to include 66 Child Development Centers and two charter schools that serve 21 counties in the state of Florida. Serving children as young as six weeks old, RCMA's goal is to give migrant and low-income children a safe learning environment and to set them up with the tools for success

before they enter the K-12 system.

ELDP Class 11 traveled to RCMA's Dover location to deliver food and other childcare supplies that we had been collecting. Elizabeth Ruiz and Clay Hollencamp of RCMA welcomed the class and gave us a tour of the facilities. It is a beautiful and well-maintained campus with friendly staff, brightly decorated classrooms and a large outdoor playground area for activities.

Ruiz explained how providing early childhood education for migrant families has its own unique set of challenges and how RCMA is uniquely suited to handle them. By taking both a bilingual and bicultural approach to learning, the children in this program get a great

head start before they enter the public school system but also are able to learn about their own culture to be able to better relate to their parents.

RCMA provides an essential service to families in Florida's farming communities and it wouldn't be possible without the support they receive in the form of both donations and volunteers. If you would like to find out how you can support RCMA, visit rcma.org.



Finding the perfect berry lineup



By **David Wheeler Jr.**
Wheeler Farms, Inc.

Driscoll's is known around the world for its premier quality of berries. The Driscoll's company slogan makes this very clear, stating "only the finest berries". To ensure that consumers are enjoying the best product available, numerous hours of research, hard work and dedication are required to achieve the best results. Once a selected variety of berries is chosen, it will be combined with other outstanding selections, to select for the perfect lineup.

Class 11 recently had the chance to visit the Driscoll's test farm in Dover. The test farm is located at G&F Farms, owned by Michelle Williamson, an FFVA board member. Williamson gave the class a brief overview of some of the

adversities that the berry industry is facing, like water issues. The class then was able to hear from Dr. Ray Jacobs, who is a subtropical plant breeder for Driscoll's. He oversees the breeding program which develops new varieties of berries. This job is crucial to ensure that the best berries are being put into production in the field. Some of the main factors that are being monitored and recorded are size, color, sugar content and compatibility to being packed and shipped. The berries must be able to endure travel time from the farm to the store.

Class 11 had the chance to taste test several different varieties of strawberries and raspberries. Driscoll's offers an interactive mobile platform to use during the test that allows participants the option to take a survey and rate the berries. The surveys are reviewed, and the feedback is taken into consideration. The Driscoll's test farm was a very informative and interactive experience.



Southern Citrus Nursery continues expansion of hydroponic production



By **Miles Armstrong**
TradeMark Nitrogen

If we learned one thing during this leg of our ELDP experience, it certainly was that agriculture is a family business. After a fantastic visit with Michelle Williamson earlier in the morning at Driscoll's test plot in Plant City, we had the pleasure of visiting her brother, Maurice Turgeau, at Southern Citrus Nursery in Dundee.

During the 2020-2021 growing season, Turgeau and crew tested their hybrid approach to growing strawberries out of the soil, hydroponically, under protective structures. For multiple reasons, this experiment has grown into a full-scale operation with plans

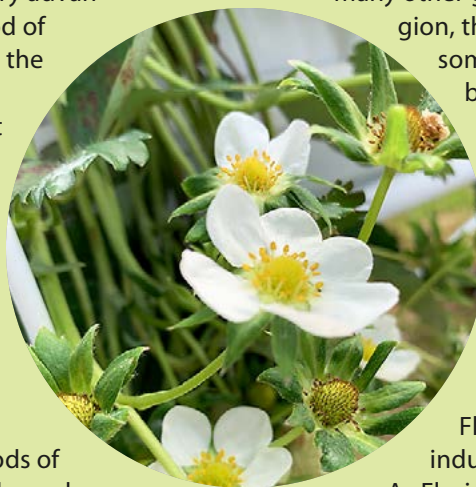
to expand their acreage of organic and conventional strawberries, raspberries, and even some acres of blackberries.

One of the primary advantages of this method of berry production is the ability to bring the first crop to harvest in four weeks, as opposed to conventional field-grown operations with the first berries in roughly seven weeks. Southern Citrus has also utilized various methods of biological control through the release of beneficial insects to help reduce miticide and insecticide applications during the growing season. Through a careful approach

to managing the pH of their growing media, Southern Citrus is having one of their most successful seasons. And, like many other growers in the region, they have produced some of their sweetest berries to date!

During our visit, Turgeau also stressed the need for consistency in the marketplace. With too many brands and varieties, the success of the Florida strawberry industry can be diluted.

As Florida's third most valuable crop, Turgeau felt that the industry should elevate all offerings to continue to promote one of our state's tastiest snacks.





Dundee packing facility taking shape in an ever-changing market



By **Jackson Autry**
Everglades Equipment

The Florida citrus industry, once a booming agricultural powerhouse, has been in decline for over two decades. With citrus greening and the unpredictable environmental elements of Florida's sub-tropical climate continuing to challenge the citrus industry, many farmers and packing houses have been forced to close their doors.

However, there are those that adapt and thrive in the face of adversity. One such example would be the Dundee Packing Facility located in Lake Hamilton, Fla. Dundee Citrus Growers Association

purchased the Lake Hamilton facility in 1999 and immediately began to renovate the 70-year-old facility.

Built in the 1920s, the building and its original network of equipment was not suitable to meet the demands of a modern packing house. The original equipment was replaced with more advanced systems

and the original spaghetti-like configuration was reworked into a more user-friendly design.

Since then, the facility has been used extensively to pack for the 200-plus members that grow over 10,000 acres of citrus every year. In addition to commercial packing, Dundee Packing Facility also caters to 25 or more gift fruit companies, a niche market that provides the facility diversity within the citrus industry. Taking orders online and over the phone, Dundee Packing Facility processes nearly 250,000 gift orders every year.

While the citrus industry continues to face uncertainty, it is difficult to envision what the future of Florida citrus might look like. Dundee Packing Facility is a prime example of what success looks like when taking risks to explore diversification in an ever-changing industry.





Wheeler Farms finds value in peach production



By **Jason Chandler**
Grimmway Farms

Florida citrus has been under fire from the Asian citrus psyllid and greening (HLB) for nearly 15 years. Wheeler Farms' fresh citrus production in the Dundee area is no exception to the bacterial infection and the reduced yield and

quality it induces. As Wheeler Farms COO Paul Koukos recounted, "citrus production before greening was kind of a set-it-and-forget-it type of farming," referring to the resiliency and consistent production of citrus groves prior to the onset of HLB. A few years after greening set in, David Wheeler, Sr. recalls, "it was very evident that diversification would be important going forward" as they looked at other options and prepared to transition into the fourth generation of the family business.

In the coming years, Wheeler Farms took a hard look at some of the newer low-chill-hour peach varieties coming out of the UF breeding program and decided to strategically transition some of the declining groves in lower elevations of their land where they may find more chill hours. Koukos noted that the "row spacing and arrangement of the peach plantings worked well with the existing infrastructure; we were able to utilize the same irrigation systems, tractors and sprayers we were using before." He outlined their progression to the 95 acres of peaches they have today, detailing their discovery that peaches were not a

set-it-and-forget-it fruit. Instead, he stated, "the labor intensiveness and level of management is perhaps the greatest leap we had to make" as he and Wheeler walked through the orchard showing the open vase pruning method and detailing fruit thinning practices to allow for greater size and shape.

The niche Florida peach business has been a bright spot for Wheeler Farms, but it was mentioned by Wheeler that their business would only be as good as their marketing and ability to get the Florida peach in front of consumers. In recent years, USDA specialty crop block grants have helped provide funding for promotional materials and ads highlighting the fresh Florida peach season. Wheeler expressed excitement about several retailers' support for their fruit and hopes to continue extending the marketing window by collaborating with UF and other breeding programs to develop more low-chill varieties for Florida. Let's all be sure to enjoy and share a Florida peach with someone as the harvest season kicks off in April.



Dun-D's long tradition of supporting Florida citrus growers



By **Leo Camelo**
HM Clause

The Dundee Citrus Growers Association is one of the largest fresh fruit cooperatives in the state of Florida. Dundee harvests multiple citrus varieties from more than 10,000 acres throughout the state. The cooperative has a long history of helping its growers manage through difficult challenges, which includes managing through the devastating economic damages caused by citrus greening.

The cooperative was established in 1924. It now includes growers of blueberries, citrus and peaches. In 1999, The cooperative was joined by the Lake Wales and Winter Haven Citrus Growers Associations, which became members of Dundee Citrus Growers Association. In 2004, Lake Region Packing also joined Dundee. During our visit, CEO Steven Callaham mentioned that "consolidation is a theme in this industry and will likely continue." In 2016, the cooperative had a groundbreaking year. It packed and shipped its first

Florida-grown blueberry crop, and it started its project of growing citrus under protective screens (the C.U.P.S. project).

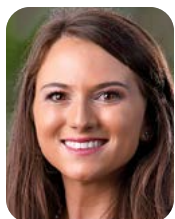
The cooperative manages a labor force of 750 individuals, who are involved in strawberry, blueberry, citrus and peach harvest.

All members are guaranteed a crop harvest crew and schedule. All produce marketing is done in-house under the Florida Classic

Growers brand. During our visit, it became clear that the cooperative has two priorities that are top of mind. First, the success and profitability of their grower members. And second, the success and profitability of the citrus industry in this great state of Florida.



Continuing tradition with Fancy Farms



By **Gracelyn Byrd**
U.S. Sugar

Fancy Farms owners Dustin Grooms and sister Kristi – as well as their dad, Carl – welcomed the ELDP Class 11 to see their strawberry fields, drink strawberry milkshakes, and learn about the challenges they face in a rapidly changing landscape.

Polk and Hillsborough counties are booming with new warehouses as companies like Amazon rush to build new distribution centers, taking advantage

of the area's proximity to major Florida cities. Despite its new neighbors, the farm continues its tradition of growing strawberries, blackberries, peppers and cucurbits on 125 acres and operating a small farm stand where the public can purchase fresh produce and desserts.

At the cost of \$30,000 per acre, strawberry production is a risky business. Based on supply and demand, the market can change at a moment's notice, and the entrance of California's crop dictates the length of the season Florida growers can market their crop.

Labor is another challenge. According to Dustin Grooms, Fancy Farms hasn't had a job application submitted in 10 years, leaving them to rely 100% on the

H-2A program. Even with the H-2A labor contracts, there is still uncertainty. They may only have 40 people on days when they need 120.

Now more than ever, the farm's motto, "since 1974 and still learning," rings true amid their 48th strawberry crop. The Fancy Farms team knows how to innovate and is open to trying new things that can help them mitigate risks like pest pressure. Dustin Grooms has recently tried intercropping zucchini in strawberry blocks, planting companion species that attract beneficial insects to alleviate spider mite pressure, and using PARABUG drone technology to release predatory mites for biological control of insect pests on the farm.





It takes a team to grow a berry



By **Matt Bardin**
Glades Crop Care Inc.

Hillsborough County has an impressive amount of berry production, and at the top of the list is Florida Pacific. We met with Andy Brownlee and Sarah Williams to walk through their blueberry production under hoop houses. Brownlee seems like a laid-back grower, but don't let that fool you. He knows berry farming inside and out and can explain the purpose of every small detail. They have looked thoroughly at the risks and benefits to this new farming practice. The major benefits are less dew on the fruit to pick any time of day as well

as bringing berries to market earlier. If you have never walked through a covered hoop house, you can expect a temperature of five to 10 degrees and 10-20% higher humidity. This environment under the plastic can lead to higher pest and disease pressures. The plastic benefit as a physical barrier for birds also has a downside with possible pollination issues if bees cannot find their way. Choosing the correct varieties is key with all berries. Good growers look for disease resistance, fruit set timing and pollination, with improved flavor being the highest priority.

Florida Pacific is foremost a strawberry grower, and they pride themselves

in quality. They look at everything down to the way the fruit is packed in the clamshell. The large volume of a time-sensitive harvest required in strawberry farming requires a large volume of labor force. Increasing pressure on the housing market continues to challenge the situation particularly along the I-4 corridor. Williams described the additional requirements of ensuring vaccination of their guest workers. Brownlee and Williams both spoke to the success of their operation, attributing it to the strength of their team from top to bottom.

Administration, farm managers and harvesters all have to be on the same page.



Florida Strawberry Growers: An association with impact



By **Ben Backus**
DLF Packing

The Florida Strawberry Growers Association (FSGA) is headquartered in an unassuming building off a quiet road in Plant City. The decisions being made inside that small building, however, can be felt across the country. Class 11 was given an amazing presentation by Kenneth Parker, Brianne Reichenbach and Tiffany Dale. We unfortunately missed their infamous mascot, Jammer, along with Sue Harrell, who were in Gainesville meeting Albert and Alberta.

FSGA oversees two sister organizations: the Florida Strawberry Research and Education Association and the Florida Strawberry Patent Service. Membership into FSGA represents about 80% of the acreage grown in Florida, almost 9,000 acres. In return for their fee, FSGA advocates for its growers on issues ranging from the county all the way to D.C. on a federal level.

The Patent Service works with breeders across the country to create new varieties that can be licensed and sold to other growers, even in other countries. Members of FSGA receive some of the royalties from the licenses, which offsets costs of membership fees. In years past, traditional breeding methods would take over 10 years to create a new commercially viable strawberry plant. With today's genetic marking technology, FSGA has reduced that 10-year timeline to just four years.

The FSGA's marketing team has made major strides in recent years. On top of creating Jammer, who has his own educational coloring book, they were also featured in a Super Bowl commercial, on Sirius XM, and have a cookbook. The FSGA awards a scholarship at their annual meeting and has awarded hundreds of thousands of dollars to students since 1983.

Be on the lookout in your local grocery store for the new, FSGA member-grown, white strawberry (or pineberry)!



ELDP news

- 1 Zachary Sweat (Class 6)** and his wife are expecting their second daughter in March 2022.
- 2 Carla Aurora (Class 8)** has joined PepsiCo/Tropicana as the new Global Procurement Manager, NA Fruit & Vegetable.
- 3 Clay Pederson (Class 10)** and his wife are celebrating 10 years of marriage.

