

EMERGING TIMES

...growing toward the future

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SOUTH FLORIDA PRODUCTION



In late March, Class 11 of FFVA's Emerging Leader Development Program toured several farm operations in the Everglades Agricultural Area. The group learned about production practices and processing for a variety of crops including leafy greens, radishes, green beans, sweet corn and mangos.

Class members heard from FFVA board members and others on the challenges facing the industry, including unfair Mexican trade practices and soaring costs due to disruptions in the supply chain, as well as the benefits of growing in muck soil, exploring new crop varieties and farming cooperatively.

The itinerary also included a visit to the Lawrence E. Will Museum in Belle Glade, where the class learned about the history of the area. Grower's Management President Paul Orsenigo and FFVA President Mike Joyner joined the class for the tour.

Pictured above is Class 11 in an R.C. Hatton sweet corn field.

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SUSTAINING SPONSOR



Duda puts the specialty in specialty crop farming



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

Duda was founded with celery as a mainstay in Oviedo in the early 1900s and has grown to be a leader in the industry. Sam Jones, general manager, explained that Duda is still family owned after four generations and almost 100 years. Duda's Belle Glade farm at season's peak is the largest contiguous celery acreage in the world. Their variety program plays a huge role in their celery success. Every farm has seed research, and selections are made to cater to each one of their growing areas. Selections are made targeting crunchiness, sweetness, packing strength and disease resistance. Duda is able to seep irrigate for about 50 percent of the season and utilizes

drip during the drier months. This lengthens their season to close production gaps between other areas.

Soil and water conservation are major targets for every good land manager and Perry Yance sets the bar high. Duda has partnered with the state to monitor phosphorous for decades and is playing its part in complying with Best Management Practices. Fields are flooded every summer for the benefit of the soil. Jones explained how 35-plus bird species call the flooded fields home through the summer and the Audubon Society busses in photographers and enthusiasts to enjoy the show. Duda is much more than the Dandy brand everyone knows at the grocery store. Cattle, sod, citrus and real estate are other large operations within the company. A. Duda and Sons has a long history of success with no plans of slowing down for generations to come.



Quality, food safety top of mind for TKM



By **Chacen Taylor**
Lipman Family Farms

As third- and fourth-generation farmers from Michigan, the Basore family of TKM Bengard Farms is no stranger to lettuce production. With over 14 types of lettuce grown on their land each year, TKM has been able to supply most of the major food chains around the United States. According to the Basore family, over 100 million pounds of iceberg lettuce is harvested and packed through their operation each year. Roughly 60 percent of their crop is iceberg lettuce and close to 30 percent of their crop grown is romaine.

The muck soil of Belle Glade has proven to be a key component of success to

their roughly 7,000-acre operation. "The muck is also referred to as black gold," says Ethan Basore (ELDP Class 9), a fourth-generation farmer of the Basore family. Unlike sand and clay, the muck soil supplies its own nitrogen, making it one of the richest soils for crop production in the country. Local farmers have relied on the soil to support the agribusiness economy in Belle Glade for many years.

Another aspect that plays a role in their success is the constant monitoring and implementation of food safety and sustainability. Stephen Basore, director of food safety for TKM, explained how food safety practices around the farm and packinghouse are a crucial piece of their day-to-day operation. From building and maintaining fencing around the crop, to deliberately placing their romaine lettuce varieties in the middle of the fields to reduce the risk of animal intrusion, they take the additional steps to ensure the



safety of their customers. "Every crop is also sampled for salmonella and E. coli before each harvest to ensure good quality," says Ethan Basore.

Machine harvesters and weeders are also utilized in the field. With input costs at an all-time high, it is important that farmers take advantage of opportunities to use AI, or artificial intelligence, when possible. Not only do these machines help in reducing human contact, but implementing AI also assists in reducing labor costs from production, to harvesting and hauling. With product available from fall through spring, you can always count on TKM Bengard Farms to get their produce from farm to table.



Rice production in EAA offers many benefits, poised for growth



By **John Watson**
Florida Foundation
Seed Producers

Long grain rice may have great potential for increased utilization in Florida, according to Cory Cofer, senior crop protection manager for Florida Crystals.

Presently, rice is grown annually on roughly 24,000 acres in the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA). Typically, rice is viewed as a spring/summer cover crop in the EAA. It is an important piece of the sugar cane crop rotation, and it is valued

primarily for its ecological and production benefits, rather than the revenue the crop generates. Shortly after germination, rice fields are flooded, and they remain flooded until shortly prior to harvest. These flooded fields offer many benefits, including limiting soil erosion, providing control of insects, reducing weed seed viability, and providing a habitat for many species of birds and fish. These benefits can help to increase subsequent sugar cane yields. In addition, rice plants help to scavenge phosphorus, thus reducing subsequent phosphorus discharges into drainage canals. Rice is a low-cost crop with low inputs; the EAA's highly organic soil provides most of the necessary nitrogen, and the crop does not require high levels of

herbicides, insecticides, or fungicides.

In the EAA, rice planting begins in February, and harvest commences roughly 120 days after planting. If planting occurs early enough, rice producers can also achieve a second, 90-day ratoon crop. Rice productivity in Florida averages 5,000 pounds per acre, which is roughly half of the yields achieved in Louisiana and Arkansas. Cofer attributed this difference primarily to Florida's lack of access to new varieties that are well adapted to south Florida.

Florida Crystals operates the state's only rice processing facility. According to Cofer, the facility's current capacity is roughly 30,000 acres, but the facility could be expanded if needed.



Green Life Farms: Thinking outside the field



By **Jake Rothert**
Rothert Farm Inc.

Fresh Florida lettuce and greens 12 months out of the year? What was once impossible is now the way of doing business for Green Life Farms. Currently operating three hydroponic facilities in Florida and in the process of constructing its fourth, Green Life Farms is now the largest hydroponic producer in the Southeast.

Greg Graft, who leads Green Life's flagship three-acre Lake Worth location, explained to ELDP Class 11 how the unique conditions inside of their state-of-the-art facility allow them to produce fresh leafy greens all year long. That includes the cooled and oxygenated water to the custom-built greenhouse structure, which allows sun and air movement throughout while keeping out unwanted pests and pathogens. This carefully maintained environment creates the perfect growing conditions for the many crops Green Life produces, including baby spinach, baby arugula, baby kale, baby romaine, red romaine mix and butterhead lettuce.

The attention to detail of every aspect of the plant environment is what allows Green Life to produce up to as many as 18 harvests per year totaling 700,000 pounds of fresh leafy greens off this three-acre facility. Compare this to traditional farming practices which are only able to produce one to two harvests per season while using as much as 90 percent more water.

This efficiency is what makes hydroponic production stand out from conventional farming. Not only can Green Life produce more crop off less acres with less water and less chemicals, but these facilities can be built much closer to major markets. This allows shipping and storage times to be drastically reduced, both increasing quality and reducing the cost. This emphasis on locally grown, quality, and sustainable produce is what will fuel Green Life Farms' success into the future.





Hundley Farms: Fostering the future of farming



By **Jackson Autry**
Everglades Equipment

Standing in radish fields as the sun is rising, looking at the current crop, planning for the day, and coordinating the ongoing harvest – this is where you will find the owners of Hundley Farms most mornings. On our trip, it was Cooper Hopkins (ELDP Class 8), a fourth-generation family farmer, working to ensure and build on his family's legacy of farming for generations in the Glades.

Our ELDP Class 11 had the opportunity to meet with Cooper and his father, Eric

Hopkins, and learn about their rich history in farming. Eric, the vice president of Hundley Farms and FFVA board member, is well-versed in the agricultural arena and shared their story of humble beginnings and what it takes to remain a prominent contender in the farming industry today.

Hundley Farms began in 1969 with just 400 acres and has expanded into one of the largest family owned farms in the region, managing over 20,000 acres and covering a footprint from South Florida to Georgia. Their crops have grown in variety as well, expanding from the staples of sugar cane and sweet corn to green beans, radishes, field corn, cabbage, broccoli, and more.

Like many others, Hundley Farms

contends with the challenges of farming in an area under constant threat of urban sprawl and the legislation of land and water acts that lead to diminishing farmlands. The challenges continue to mount as "the land is taken out of production," Eric explains.

Like the efforts of their predecessors, these challenges have encouraged Eric and Cooper Hopkins to commit their time to advocacy groups like FFVA to shape the future of agriculture in a sustainable way. Eric explains that "the decisions made in this world are made by those that show up."

For more than five decades, the family-run operation of Hundley Farms has shown up and will continue to show up for decades to come.



A sweet harvest down in the EAA



By **Ben Backus**
DLF Packing

Only a short ride from bustling South Florida, you will find a few of the largest vegetable growers in the country. EDLP Class 11 took its most recent trip down to Belle Glade where we spent time with Les Baucum, sugar cane agronomist at U.S. Sugar. We had the opportunity to tour U.S. Sugar's Area 3 which makes up about 30,000 acres of their almost 240,000-acre portfolio. Ten percent of

the United States' sugar is produced at U.S. Sugar.

Sugar cane is a perennial crop that is harvested once a year, from October to May. First, the excess leaves are burned from the stalk and then harvested by a sugar cane-specific combine. Up until the 90s, harvesting was done by hand, using machetes and over 1,000 harvesters. Currently, U. S. Sugar only needs 12 crews to harvest their crop.

Once the sugar cane has been harvested, it's then loaded onto U.S. Sugar's private railroad system that delivers to its mill, reducing truck traffic and accidents on local roadways. One rail car holds about 40 tons of

sugar cane, or about one acre.

After all of the sugar is extracted, the remaining fibrous stocks, or bagasse, is used as fuel to run the mill and creates enough excess energy to help power thousands of homes nearby. Bagasse has also been used recently as a biodegradable substitute for paper plates and trays.

Sugar cane farms are ecofriendly and, in many ways, environmentally helpful. For example, in the EAA, where the muck soil is drastically deteriorating, sugar cane acts as a preventative to erosion. Sugar cane is planted about every five years, so less tilling is needed and the soil is less disturbed, preserving it for many more years of farming.



Family drives lettuce leader



By **Chris Meyer**
Corteva Agriscience

TKM Bengard Farms is a family business managed by the six Basore brothers: Tom, Jr.; Brian; Toby; Kevin; Michael; and Stephen. The company is the largest lettuce grower east of the Mississippi River and sells produce to many major processors and retailers. That's why the words on the company website ring true: "If you eat salads, there's a good chance that you have eaten lettuce grown by TKM Bengard."

As visitors to the TKM packing house in Belle Glade, ELDP Class 11 was able to tour the operation that cools and packs a tremendous volume and variety

of leafy greens. The tour was an experience that highlighted some of the unique requirements for handling fresh leafy greens, particularly from a food safety perspective.

Food safety is of upmost importance from when the product is picked in the field all the way until it reaches its final destination. TKM is able to ensure its products meet safety requirements by making sure the shipping trucks are clean, precooled prior to loading, and monitored in transit with remote temperature data recorders placed in the



shipping containers.

In addition to packing leafy greens from Florida, the packing facility handles produce from across the country, and even as far away as Quebec, Canada. This network of

growers and partners allows the Basore family to

keep the packing house operational all 52 weeks of the year. Some of that capability came as a result of demands from retailers, who now place high importance on year-round supply of product.



Erickson Farms a local treasure



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

Located in Canal Point, Erickson Farms was the most unique stop of Class 11's south Florida farm tour.

Kim Erickson, a fourth-generation farmer, guided the class through the 60-acre estate her great-great-grandparents homesteaded in 1911 and explained the inner workings of her family's operation. Clever risk management is critical for their success because their crops are not insurable and competition from Mexican and Central American imports put enormous pressure on the small farm.

According to Erickson, the keys to overcoming these challenges are crop and market diversity. Erickson Farms grow 20 marketable varieties of mango trees on 40 of the farm's 60 acres. Other tropical fruits like lychee, sapodilla, and avocado make up the remaining 20 acres. To compete with mango imports from Mexico and Central America, Erickson Farms specializes in growing high-quality

varieties that do not ship well and are hard to grow. Top-secret micronutrient fertilizer programs tailored to each mango variety on muck soil enhances their competitive advantage.

Catering to demands outside the traditional ripe mango market has effectively diversified their market opportunities. Green mangos, for example, are popular in Asian and Indian grocery stores, and

mango leaves are clipped and sold to Hindu temples and families to whom the leaves hold religious significance.

Erickson Farms is a local treasure as rich in history as it is in agricultural diversity. The Erickson family has remained true to its historical and traditional roots for over a century while identifying creative channels to grow its business and stay competitive in the tropical fruit market.





Five things to know from the Lawrence E. Will Museum



By **Leo Camelo**
HM Clause

ELDP Class 11's trip in South Florida included a visit to the Lawrence E. Will Museum in Belle Glade, where the class learned about the history of the area. Florida Agricultural Hall of Famer Dr. Joseph Orsenigo founded, and for many years was the curator of, the museum.

1. Hamilton Disston tentatively agreed to purchase four million acres in South Florida for 25 cents per acre, an agreement that became a formal contract on June 1, 1881. Disston signed the contract on June 14 and *The New York Times* described the transaction as "the largest purchase of land ever made by a single person in the world." This agreement included all the Glades area.



2. Lawrence Elmer Will arrived in the Glades region in 1913. He eventually published six books chronicling life on Lake Okeechobee and in the upper Everglades. One of them, "Okeechobee Hurricane: Killer Storms in the Everglades," provides Will's first-hand account of the 1926 and 1928 hurricanes that devastated the Glades.

3. The prehistoric people of the Belle Glade Cultural Area lived in a time before there was a written record of history of them. They had no written language, so there was no self-recording of the beliefs and achievements. No history existed until the Spanish explorers arrived in 1513.

4. The prehistoric people of the Belle Glade Cultural Area flourished from about 2,500 years ago to around AD 1800. By 1763, when the Spanish first left Florida, the Belle Glade people had disappeared because of diseases and slave raids. They were rediscovered in

1934 when a team of archaeologists excavated a mound at Belle Glade and found enough of their cultural material to define them as a distinct culture.

5. The Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) was designated by the Central and Southern Florida Protection Act in 1948. This project established 470,000 acres for the EAA. This is equivalent to approximate 27 percent of the Everglades prior to its development.

But wait, there's more... Here's one for the sports fans: Glades Central Community High School produced more National Football League players than any other high school in the country during the 2001 season (seven players). The school won six Florida high school football titles. Their main rivals are the Pahokee Blue Devils. The Blue Devils play the Raiders each year in the so-called "Muck Bowl."



R.C. Hatton: Innovation and marketing provide optimism



By **Jason Chandler**
Grimmway Farms

The sweet corn shipping season should have been in full swing during our trip through the Everglades Agricultural Area in late March. However, as Jonathan Allen (ELDP Class 2) of R.C. Hatton reminded our group as we walked alongside the harvest crews in the field, the sweet corn harvest volume was down in recent weeks due to impacts from the late January freeze. As Allen recalled their efforts to save their crops from the cold, "we had choppers flying all night; it seems like everyone did. There might have been 100 different helicopter crews in the area during those two nights, but there is only so much area they can cover, and there was just no way to save it all – so

you do what you can and move forward."

Even with the weather setbacks, Allen was optimistic about this season's crop and the progress they are making through the marketing efforts of their company, Branch: A Family of Farms, and the Sunshine Sweet Corn Farmers of Florida. He was especially excited, as any father would be, about the start of the red and green cabbage harvest which is marketed under the label "Gracelynn" which includes the name of his daughter, Grace, and his niece, Lynn.

While watching hand harvesting crews in the field, Allen pointed to the mechanical sweet corn harvester

sitting idle across the field and said, "that is the future of this business parked over there."

The only reason it's parked today is to keep our H-2A labor busy during the slow period we are in." However, with labor getting more difficult

to source and wage rates increasing, there will be a continued effort to innovate and mechanize all of the sweet corn harvesting process as growers work with seed companies to develop varieties with greater stalk strength that will remain standing once the corn reaches maturity.

When asked about the biggest challenges of 2022, Allen stated, "the cost of fuel and fertilizer are going to make things tough this season and not leave a lot of room for error." Then, he quickly followed that with a smile and acknowledged that every year comes with a challenge and said, "you learn, adapt and keep moving forward."





Pioneer Growers finds strength in diverse membership base



By **Miles Armstrong**
TradeMark Nitrogen

Sweet corn, green beans, radishes, cabbage, leafy greens, hydroponic herbs and leaves, and sweet potatoes round out the short list of commodities that Pioneer Growers works with on an annual basis. Packing, marketing, and distributing these items all over the country, Stewart Mann and his team have a job that requires them to be on the ball 24/7. The grower members of the cooperative know that Pioneer Growers has the resources required to market their produce to customers around the country year-round, and that certainly is no easy task.

Key to Pioneer Growers' success is its relationships with its many grower members, many of which are members of the FFVA, who have spanned generations of growing produce in the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA). These members have withstood the test of time growing produce here, and have managed their crops through hurricanes, cold fronts, and the impending pressures of a growing population in Florida. A significant focus on food safety and implementing modern agricultural practices and technologies is absolutely required for their members to continue to be successful in the EAA.

For more than 70 years, Pioneer Growers has been at the forefront of our industry, and we can all be proud of what this business has accomplished and will continue to accomplish for decades to come.



ELDP news

- 1 **Zachary Sweat (Class 6)** and his wife Allison celebrated the arrival of their second daughter, Cassidy, on March 22.
- 2 **Andrew Bryan (Class 6)** and his wife Jana welcomed twins, Caroline Joy and Tucker Jackson, on March 9.
- 3 **Eric Greenhow (Class 10)** and Sarah Linton welcomed a baby boy, Maveric Moses, in January.
- 4 **Miles Armstrong (Class 11)** is now a senior ag sales advisor with BASF.

