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Florida's West Coast

# EMERGING TIMES

*... growing toward the future*

## Class 4 tours ag operations to learn about specialty crops



Class 4 spent time with Kevin Taylor (center) at Wm. P. Hearne Produce to learn about cabbage production.

Class 4 of FFVA's Emerging Leader Development Program hit the road in January for a tour of farming and packing operations in Hillsborough, Polk and Manatee counties. It was the group's third seminar in the yearlong program and the first time class members had visited in the field with other FFVA members.

The group benefited from seeing a variety of operations up close as well as the opportunity to have frank discussions with FFVA producer members about the challenges they face.

Tour stops and hosts included the Florida Strawberry Growers Association, Florida Pacific Farm, DiMare Fresh, Wish Farms, Fancy Farms, Farm Credit, Wm. G. Roe & Sons, Florida's Natu-

ral Growers, Wm. P. Hearne Produce, Lipman Produce and the UF/IFAS Gulf Coast Research and Education Center.

A highlight of the trip was the delivery of food to the RCMA center in Dover. The group had conducted a food drive in the weeks before the tour that netted large quantities of non-perishable food, children's books and clothing.

"We appreciate the generosity of both FSGA and Farm Credit of Central Florida for providing lunches, and to Florida's Natural Growers Foundation for sponsoring the bus," said Sonia Tighe, director of the program and the Florida Specialty Crop Foundation.





## Production trip starts at FSGA



by Shine Taylor  
DuPont Crop Protection

Our Florida production trip kicked off with the Florida Strawberry Growers Association in Dover. Our hosts were Executive Director Kenneth Parker; Sue Harrell, director of marketing; and Alicia Whidden, extension faculty with the University of Florida.

We were introduced to some of the research that is conducted in the field. Parker, a sixth-generation Floridian and a certified crop advisor with extensive knowledge of strawberry production, walked the plots with us and discussed the breeding research while we watched Dr. Craig Chandler evaluate new cultivars. We learned how the UF breeding program works in coordination with the FSGA and were able to see in the field some of the most popular cultivars that are grown commercially in the Plant City area. We also discussed current issues, including problems associated with Botrytis fruit rot. Unfortunately, with cooler, wetter conditions perfect for Botrytis development, we were able to see the damage from this fungus firsthand.

Harrell, also known as "Strawberry Sue," discussed Sue's Corner, a blog created to market and promote Florida's strawberries. Harrell discussed the challenges of marketing to a growing audience on the internet and how the FSGA is catering to that demographic, including interacting with food bloggers and chefs from around the country to use Florida strawberries in their recipes. Harrell also has used traditional media including some recent work in a national magazine to promote Florida strawberries. We also discussed how to market in local and regional grocery chains and the challenges and complexity of those decisions on our customers. Harrell's discussion about her role with FSGA and marketing our unique product from Florida would be a theme we would hear on other stops.

Whidden talked about her role as an extension agent to the growers and community. She has responsibilities for vegetables and small fruit, which in Hillsborough County vary widely. Her information was very insightful and gave the class a good understanding of the importance of what she does in the community and the role of UF extension in Florida.



FSGA Executive Director Kenneth Parker shows class members strawberries in the test plots located on FSGA property.

## Farm Credit borrowers share in the profits



by Dustin Grooms  
Fancy Farms, Inc.

During our production trip we were able to see where many agricultural companies receive the loans for their new or thriving businesses: Farm Credit of Central Florida in Lakeland. We were met by Ron O'Connor, director of marketing and governmental affairs, and Regina Thomas, senior vice president/chief business development officer.

Farm Credit also sponsored lunch from Olive Garden, which we were able to enjoy during the presentations. We all had our FFVA white shirts on, and a few of us left with pasta sauce on them. At the end of lunch we met Chief Executive Officer Reggie Holt and a few board members for a question-and-answer session.

O'Connor gave an overview of the history of Farm Credit, which provides more than \$191 billion in loans and \$260 billion in assets to farmers, ranchers, rural homeown-

ers, aquatic producers, timber harvesters, agribusinesses, and agricultural and rural utility cooperatives. The organization has a 10-member board of directors -- nine of whom are borrowers, which gives great insight on the agriculture industry. Agriculture loans are the bread and butter of this organization; however, it does finance home loans as well. Farm Credit is a cooperative, so borrowers are considered stockholders and share in the profits.

Thomas discussed Farm Credit's lending operation. They have a loan analysts located on the third and fourth floors of their Lakeland location along with other administrative jobs. Farm Credit of Central Florida has four branches: Apopka, Brooksville, Lake Wales and Plant City. Agricultural operating loans and real estate loans are the mainstay of the business. They also work with the USDA to help farmers get loans with multiple different avenues of approach. Loans are priced on cost of funds with the sale of bonds in the GSE bond market.

Farm Credit borrowers have long enjoyed the benefits of doing business with local offices, where people know their business, their community and their market, Thomas said. Farm Credit's mission is to be the "Lender of Choice" for agriculture.





## A firsthand look at greenhouse production



by Dan Bott  
Premier Citrus Management

Skeeter Bethea was our host during our stop at DiMare Fresh Farms in Ruskin. The DiMare companies began with a pushcart filled with produce on the streets of Boston more than 80 years ago. Today, the DiMare family is in its third generation of farming on the east and west coasts. Their companies are leaders in developing new and improved practices.

DiMare Fresh was created in 2003 through the integration of other DiMare companies to better leverage the companies' vertical integration, supply chain, and expertise. The company operates in eight facilities in California, Texas, Illinois, Pennsylvania and Florida. DiMare is focused on enhancing the company's core commodities and specializes in a full line of tomatoes including rounds, romas, grapes, and vine-ripe tomatoes. They also produce a wide assortment of other items, including bell peppers, cucumbers, squash, onions, potatoes, avocados, lettuce, broccoli, celery, bananas, berries and citrus.

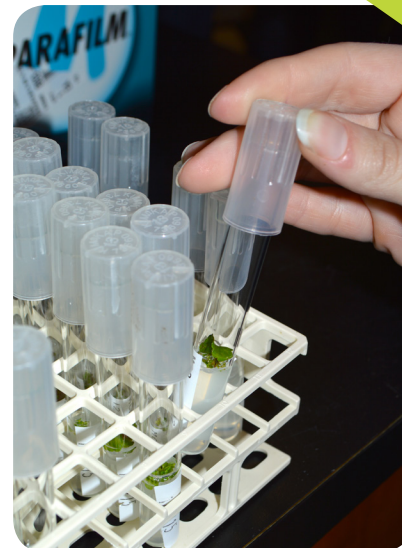
DiMare is continually upgrading its facilities, systems, and equipment as new technology emerges. Bethea gave the class a tour of DiMare's new greenhouse facility in Ruskin where the company is growing roma tomatoes. He also provided in-depth production insight into their current fertilizer and pest management practices and what could be the future of protected agriculture practices. A primary goal of DiMare has been to provide high-quality produce to customers from an environment that supports social responsibility and sustainability initiatives.



Skeeter Bethea (right) of DiMare Fresh talks about the challenges of greenhouse production of roma tomatoes.







Upon arrival at the Gulf Coast Research and Education Center class members were asked to put their taste buds to work on several different strawberry varieties (left). They then toured the strawberry tissue culture lab where several cultivars are in various stages of propagation.

## Center tour gives close look at research



by Teddy McAvoy

Upon our arrival at the UF/IFAS Gulf Coast Research and Education Center, Director Dr. Jack Rechcigl gave us an overview of the research being conducted there. Several faculty members then introduced themselves and gave a description their research programs. Dr. Samuel Hutton discussed his tomato breeding program, designed to provide resistance to tomato yellow leaf curl virus, bacterial spot and whitefly. He's also working on breeding a tomato that has compact growth and jointless fruit stems (calyx) so it can be mechanically harvested. Dr. Natalia Peres' research focuses on strawberry fungal diseases. She has developed a disease model that monitors for a suitable environment to predict fungal development. The web-based system alerts growers when conditions are conducive for disease outbreak. Dr. Gurpal Toor focuses on environmental and water quality effects. His research is

on nitrogen runoff sources from urban areas into Tampa Bay.

Our group then toured the research facility, starting with the diagnostic clinic. The types of samples being submitted to the clinic clue faculty to disease outbreaks and current problems. Catalina Moyer gave us a tour of the strawberry tissue culture lab. The cultures are from filed selections that will become new cultivars for propagation. Tissue culture produces plants that are clean of insects and diseases for nursery material.

We also had a field tour. The first stop was a demonstration of protected agriculture presented by Dr. Gary Vallad. The main benefit of growing strawberries in a protected structure is the ability to modify the environment to prevent disease and protect from frost. Tomas Hasing showed us the strawberry variety trials. Strawberry characteristics being selected are growth habit, fruit production, fruit size, fruit shape, disease resistance and taste preference. Dr. Nathan Boyd then displayed his weed science research. He is working on management of nutsedge, black medic and Carolina geranium in strawberries. Another interest of Boyd's is using selective herbicides and directed sprays to kill strawberries without harming the second crop in a double cropping system.

## A very inventive family operation



by Paul Miller  
Pioneer Growers Co-op

As we were finishing up our presentation and lunch at Farm Credit, I pulled out the agenda to see where we were headed next. Wm. G. Roe & Sons in Winter Haven was scheduled as the next stop, and we were set up to tour the citrus and blueberry packing facilities. As we pulled up to Wm. G. Roe & Sons, I noticed it was an older looking building that was rather large, and not some state-of-the-art facility I had imagined.

We were greeted for our tour of Wm. G. Roe & Sons by Bill Roe, his son Geoff Roe (Class 3) and daughter April Roe Porter (Class 1). April discussed some of the new juices being launched under the Noble brand and their partnership with the Seminole tribe to help promote the juices.

Bill and Geoff's tour of the packinghouse gave us a good picture of the process from beginning to end. Bins of citrus were dumped onto a conveyor belt that runs

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up and over a sorting belt, which drops all the smaller fruit through to be thrown out or shipped as No. 2s. The fruit ran across a sanitation wash and through a few grading tables. An expensive and intelligent piece of machinery then kicked out any fruit that was off-color or blemished. It was very impressive to see this piece of machinery work in real time speed with the fruit flying by. At the end employees packaged the fruit.

Bill pointed out a spot in the packaging line where a machine had been. It would frequently be down because of repairs. So he designed a station manned by four employees who eventually could run faster than the machine. Just because something is new and supposed to be better doesn't always make it true for one's operation, he said.

A huge painted mural by a local artist adorns the side of the blueberry facility. We got a look in the cold box at some blueberries packed the previous day. After touring both facilities, I concluded that farmers are inventive problem-solvers who work with whatever they have to get things done. It makes you appreciate their resilience when it comes to bringing their crops from the field to the table.

## Tour broadens our produce industry network



by Matt Griffin  
Lipman Produce

One of many great things this program provides is the opportunity to network with a wide array of people in the produce industry. Additionally, we gain exposure to different sectors, giving us a wider perception of everything that this business encompasses. The program accomplishes this with the sessions, conferences and tours that we are able to participate in both locally and out of state. The January session allowed us to visit different operations and agencies in the Hillsborough, Manatee and Polk County areas.

On the last day we toured some of the fields of Wm. P. Hearne Produce. Hearne grows and markets a range of commo-

ties year-round, and we were able to stop by one of their cabbage farms, which was in full production. Our host, Kevin Taylor, was more than willing to answer any questions we had. He gave a good overview of the company's cabbage production and what it takes to make a crop. This included pest management, the growing process on slope-irrigated fields, harvesting and packaging.

Florida production of cabbage by Hearne runs December through mid-May to late June, along with the help of production in Georgia. In the middle of that growing season there is the big push to provide for the St. Patrick's Day demand. Needless to say, this is a busy time of the year, and we appreciated Taylor for the time he spent hosting and answering our questions on the tour.



Bill and Geoff Roe have class members gather around as they explain the process of packing citrus in their Winter Haven packinghouse.





The group spent time with Wish Farms owner and head pixie, Gary Wishnatzki (fourth from left), and director of marketing, Amber Kosinsky (far left), at the Wish Farms offices in Plant City.

## Wish Farms: Dedicated to quality for generations



by Nathan Decker  
Monsanto

Our second day started off right on schedule. We loaded the bus on time AGAIN, and we were off to our first stop at Wish Farms, one of the largest strawberry producers in Florida. We were met by ELDP Class 2 graduate Amber Kosinsky. We were joined by Wish Farms Executive Vice President J.C. Clinard and third-generation Wishnatzki, owner, and head pixie Gary Wishnatzki.

"Quality produce since 1922" is the company motto and a great customer experience was an ongoing theme. Throughout his discussion, we could tell his love and pride for the company runs deep.

Harris Wishnatzki, Gary's grandfather, was a Russian immigrant who started selling fruit and vegetables from a push cart in lower Manhattan. One cart turned into two, and before long he joined another push cart merchant, Daniel Nathel, in the early 1920s. They began buying train cars of produce, which eventually turned into their wholesale business. Harris Wishnatzki traveled to the Plant City area in the winter of 1929. He liked the area so much he decided to set up a shipping operation here. His sons took over the business in 1955, and Gary Wishnatzki got his

start with the company in 1974.

Wishnatzki attributes the company's success to development of processes and systems that give Wish Farms a competitive advantage, including FreshQC™, a patented traceability system. It allows the company to track strawberries down to each clam shell and each clam shell to each picker.

Wishnatzki and Clinard praised Kosinsky's work on Wish Farms' marketing. She handles everything from responding to consumers' comments to developing marketing pieces that generate brand recognition with retailers and consumers. Quality customer service and a favorable customer experience are most important at Wish Farms.

We toured the coolers where the berries are stored, staged and prepared to ship. It was nice to see that the coolers weren't too full, which means strawberries were moving well and hopefully bringing better prices for Florida's farmers.

## Farming: Life's most rewarding profession



by John Alderman  
Duda Farm Fresh Foods

On day two of ELDP's January production trip, we visited with Carl and Dee Dee Grooms of Fancy Farms. Fancy Farms is a strawberry grower in Plant City consisting of around 250 acres of strawberry produc-

tion. Their son, Dustin, is a member of Class 4. It was a unique opportunity to learn about a leader in the strawberry industry, have a firsthand look at a classmate's operation and to hear directly from Dustin. On this particular day Carl, Dee Dee and the entire Fancy Farms team were on site and harvesting strawberries. Fancy Farms' berries are sold and marketed through Wish Farms, also of Plant City. The challenge of this particular day was working through berries that were showing signs of a Botrytis rot. The finished pack was a fantastic berry in both taste and appearance.

On the subject of varieties being bred to resist Phytophthora and other diseases, Carl Grooms said, "There is not a berry plant that is not prone to get something. That's why we farm and challenge all elements of nature." Berry production and acreage are down this year because of price and disease pressure, he said. Mexico's season is the same as Florida's, creating marketing challenges given Mexico's lower labor and production costs.

Fancy Farms has been in production since 1974, but it has continued to evolve and be a leader in new growing techniques. Carl Grooms said the university system has been instrumental in improvements to growing and BMPs. Pride was evident in every aspect of this multi-generational family farm. "We are agriculture. Agriculture should be the most appreciated and highest paid business there is," he said. The class finished its visit with some awesome home-baked goodies from Dee Dee Grooms, including this strawberry bread - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=02Kv7fppwl>



## RCMA: Addressing the needs of families



by John Beuttenmuller  
Florida Foundation  
Seed Producers, Inc.

Migrant farmworkers are critical to producing fresh fruits and vegetables for the world to enjoy. As these workers move from state to state each year, it's challenging for these families to have continuity in the educational development of their children. The Redlands Christian Migrant Association is able to assist these families through child development centers such as the one in Dover, which we visited.

Class 4 conducted a food drive during the weeks leading up to our visit to the center. Our bus's storage compartments were filled with non-perishable food, toys and other items. We were greeted at the RCMA center by staff members Liana Lauro and Elda Cruz, and Bill Coats, RCMA's communications director. After we unloaded countless boxes and bags of donated goods, the RCMA staff provided us with an overview of the history and mission of RCMA.

Founded in 1965 by the Mennonite Church in Homestead, RCMA started with three child care centers. By 2005, it operated more than 75 centers and two charter schools in 21 Florida counties, working with over 6,200 children. Today, RCMA is the largest non-profit child care provider in Florida with more than 8,000 children, and it is also among the largest in the United States. The organization has found it particularly important to involve parents in the learning process and to hire staff and teachers from the migrant communities it serves. RCMA also helps families access support services and other resources such as health care.

As we toured the classrooms and visited with the children, we were impressed by the diversity of ages and the breadth of the services RCMA provides. I encourage anyone unfamiliar with RCMA to learn more and explore how you can contribute to such a noble organization that impacts thousands of underprivileged youth each day.



Class members filed in to the RCMA center, each making several trips with armloads of donations.



The class toured Florida Pacific Farms' blueberries grown under high-tunnel hoop houses as well as strawberries.

## Berry business is booming



by Teddy McAvoy

The Florida Pacific Farms tour started off with a much appreciated strawberry taste test conducted by Driscoll's own plant breeder. The taste test included 15 varieties featuring standard, newly developed and competitors' cultivars. Driscoll's only sells exclusive strawberry cultivars that are developed and marketed by the company. Its berries are produced by partners such as Florida Pacific Farms who grow exclusively Driscoll berries. Driscoll's also partners with growers in California, Oregon, Mexico, South America and Europe.

Working with FFVA, Florida Pacific Farms began with 50 workers hired through the H-2A guest worker program. Now the farms in Dover and the Plant City area have grown to produce 350 acres of strawberries and 50 acres of blueberries employing 420 H-2A workers. As part of the H-2A program requirements, Florida Pacific Farms provides housing for the workers. In 2013, the company had six mobile homes for housing and added six more in 2014. Each mobile home houses eight workers, with a capacity to house 96 workers on site in trailers and the capability of housing 10 additional workers in a house on site. Transportation to the bank, grocery store, to and from the work site is provided.

We were given a tour of the strawberry and blueberry farms by Florida Pacific Farms grower Bradley Ferguson. Strawberry plants are shipped in from California and planted Oct. 1-20. During harvest, fruit is hand-picked. Florida Pacific Farms is testing out a mule train-type harvest aid that can improve efficiency by 20 percent.

Blueberries are grown deciduously in open-field production or evergreen in hoop houses. The high-tunnel hoop houses allow the grower to keep the plants from going dormant, therefore flowering and producing berries earlier than field-grown plants. The plants are grown in pine bark incorporated into the soil and covered with a weed mat. Blueberries are harvested four to five times a week during peak season.





Larry Moss entertained the class at one of Lipman's recently planted and staked tomato fields.

## Learning tomatoes from Boss Moss



by Shine Taylor  
DuPont Crop Protection

Larry Moss, grower for Lipman Produce at its Farm 15 and a lifelong tomato grower, gave us a crash course on Florida tomato production during one of the last stops on our tour. In the "war room," we sat around the table and re-created what happens every day around sunrise to prepare the Duette farm for daily operation.

Moss discussed worker safety, coordination of crews, spray schedules and other processes required to run a successful farm safely and efficiently. We were also fortunate to have Class 4 member Matt Griffin of Lipman Produce to add to the discussion on worker safety and management. This detailed coordination between

farm managers, crew leaders and field crews is important to Lipman. A map is generated daily detailing where and when work crews can be in fields. We pored over maps of the farms and discussed how crop rotation between farms and fields affects production and management of people and resources. Then we hopped back on the bus for a field tour.

Moss gave us a quick history lesson about tomato production in the area and discussed where Farm 15 was in the crop cycle, leading us to a field of recently planted spring tomatoes.

Lipman's goal is to pick tomatoes every calendar week throughout the year, but in Duette the farm was between fall and spring seasons. Fortunately, there is something always happening at Farm 15. Beds were being prepared for spring production, and a few early blocks of tomatoes had been planted.

Moss answered our questions about production and the similarities and differences between the central Florida region and other tomato-growing areas. Other questions led to a discussion of water

management, which then led to a quick topography lesson. We discussed plastic culture and the use of different colored mulches, production techniques such as upright tomato production (staking) and general pest management. By the end we had come full circle and heard some of the same themes we've talked about throughout our seminars, such as labor issues, water management and related topics.



A juvenile tomato plant soaks up some sun at Lipman's Duette farm.





## Florida's Natural markets OJ around the globe



by Meghan Pasken  
Glades Crop Care

The final stop on our second day was a visit to the Florida's Natural Grove House, a visitor's center on U.S. Highway 27 directly across from the Florida's Natural juice plant in Lake Wales. The Grove House hosts 30,000 visitors a year and is a popular stop for tours, church groups, and field trips. It offers several exhibits for guests to enjoy as well as a gift shop and juice samples.

We enjoyed an informational movie from the comfort of the Grove House's very own theater on the history of the business and the process of how orange juice is produced. Established in 1933, Florida's Natural Growers cooperative has 1,000 grower-owners and more than 60,000 acres in production. Their motto as a cooperative is, "We own the land, we own the trees, we own the company." We learned that Florida's Natural juice plant can process 13 million pounds of oranges every 24 hours and that its products are exported to 60 countries around the globe.

After the video we were welcomed by Nikki Hayde, a marketing manager for international business who also has public relations responsibilities with Florida's Natural. She explained that Florida's Natural Growers is essentially a co-op of co-ops with 14 members. We found it very interesting that Florida's Natural has licensing and packaging agreements with retailers in Korea and the Middle East and that TV commercials are being aired there. Florida's Natural orange juice is the No. 1 orange juice brand in Singapore, Hayde said. Florida's Natural prides itself on its flexibility and believes that to be one of its major competitive advantages. That willingness to pursue new ideas and possibilities has allowed Florida's Natural to tap into many foreign markets. Hayde explained that Florida's Natural has a great reputation abroad and that it is considered a safe and reliable product because it is produced in the United States. In some corners of the world it is sought after by the upper class as a status symbol, she added.



*Special thanks to the Florida's Natural Growers Foundation for providing a grant to the ELDP that was used to provide the transportation for this production tour.*

*Class 4 will travel to Tallahassee for its fourth session in March. Look for those stories in the next issue.*



# ELDP NEWS



**1:** Congratulations to **Geoff Roe** (Class 3) and his wife, Nicole, on the birth of their son Charlie in February.



**2:** **Amber Kosinsky** (Class 2 and event organizer), **Dustin Grooms** (Class 4 and picking coach) and his wife Alison Grooms pose during Wish Farms' second annual strawberry picking challenge at which \$75,000 was raised to benefit the Redlands Christian Migrant Association. Amber is also excited to announce her engagement to Matt Maloney and is looking forward to a summer wedding.



**3:** **Elton Baldy** (Class 3) and his wife, Tabithia, recently welcomed a son, Henry, to their family. Elton was also recognized in January as the 2015 Grand Champion North Carolina Auctioneer.



**Ian Bessell** (Class 2) joined Covance Laboratories as part of the Nutritional Chemistry and Food Safety – North America Regional Account Team on Jan. 24. Ian will have responsibility for all Nutritional Chemistry and Food Safety clientele in the Southeast United States. Covance is an ISO 17025 accredited food testing laboratory with facilities in the United States, Europe, and Asia that has been in the industry for over 80 years.

**4:** **Matt Stacey** (Class 3) and his wife, Julie, are expecting a baby boy in May who will make Kylee (pictured) a big sister.