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First U.S. planting of 'super' citrus tree will be in Southwest Florida

By LAURA LAYDEN

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NAPLES — You might call them super trees.

Citrus trees designed to combat canker and greening will soon go into the ground in Hendry County. It will be one of the first field tests of its kind in the country.

Canker and greening are the most destructive and deadly diseases facing growers in the world today.

Southern Gardens Citrus in Clewiston has been working with researchers on the development of disease-resistant trees. It's now ready to test the first generation of trees coming out of that research in the grove.

"Mother Nature is the ultimate test," said Rick Kress, president of Southern Gardens Citrus in Clewiston.

Southern Gardens, one of the largest citrus producers in the state, was one of the first growers in Florida to discover greening in its groves in 2005. All of its groves are in Hendry County.

Greening, also known as huanglongbing, or HLB, can now be found in all counties in Florida where citrus is grown commercially. The bacterial disease causes fruit to prematurely drop, grow lopsided, and taste bitter and salty. There's no cure for it. Eventually, it kills trees.

Canker, another bacterial disease, mars fruit and weakens trees.

Research is going on around the world to tackle the two diseases. But there haven't been many field tests of trees thought to be resistant.

"Canker and greening are not just a Florida issue," Kress. "It's a worldwide type of problem."



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Southern Gardens has paid for the research itself. Kress wouldn't say how much it has spent.

Working with researchers from Texas A&M University, AgriLife and a private Florida-based company, Integrated Plant Genetics, the grower has achieved disease resistance in the lab, Kress said.

"It's one thing to determine they have resistance in a lab," he said. "Now let's put it out in the field where it is exposed to everything else that affects its growth."

The trees have been developed through grafting. They are genetically modified.

Once Southern Gardens was hit with greening, the company decided to become proactive in fighting it, Kress said.

The grower also runs its own testing lab for greening, taking in suspicious-looking samples from its own trees and from other growers.

Southern Gardens will plant a small amount of test trees to start, Kress said.

"This is a slow process," he said. "You go from the lab to the field and continue testing."

If the test works out, Southern Gardens will eventually plant more of the trees and make them available to other growers, Kress said.

Southern Gardens is participating and sponsoring other projects to fight canker and greening.

The company received a permit from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to do the field test.

Ron Hamel, executive vice president of the Gulf Citrus Growers Association, representing the region's growers, said he hasn't heard of any other field tests of trees that show resistance to canker and greening.

"It's good to get some good news," he said. "We need good news in the industry."

Growers are facing a myriad of challenges, from higher operating costs to lower demand for their fruit.

"The Florida citrus industry is currently undertaking a massive research effort to combat citrus greening, which is one of the most destructive diseases out there. Some of the research focuses on disease resistant trees and so far it has been promising," said Andrew Meadows, a spokesman for Florida Citrus Mutual, the state's largest growers' representative.

While disease-resistant trees can provide the industry with a solution to greening in the long term, the focus has to continue on grove management and other more immediate answers, Meadows said.

"We are cautiously optimistic we can get there," he said.

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December 5, 2008
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