Florida Grapefruit Grower Goes All In To Save Groves

By Frank Giles | July 22, 2014

Scott Lambeth, production manager for Golden River Fruit Company in Vero Beach, says he and many fellow growers he communicates with are throwing everything but the kitchen sink at HLB. And, he’d throw in the sink if he thought it would help. The third generation grower says these are scary but exciting times.

“As stressful as this has become, it is exciting because every day is different and we are learning new things,” Lambeth says. “Trust me, I don’t dread it.”

The cooperative spirit among growers is one reason Lambeth has kept his confidence up in the face of HLB.

“We are competitors, but we all know we are in a dog fight with HLB and we are all in this together,” he says. “I spend a good part of my day on the phone or riding with other growers talking about what is working or not working. There are no secrets anymore.”
“Before HLB, I never did any trial work with the chemical companies. Now, I do a lot of trial work with them. We have to look for answers everywhere we can.”

The fight against HLB is making those left standing better growers. Lambeth says he had one the largest crops in the past 10 years last season.
“I think one thing we all are seeing is the groves on good land look better, and groves on bad land are just OK, but they are not going backwards,” he says.

A Complete 180

How Lambeth is managing citrus today is 180 degrees different from how he was farming just three and four years ago. “We are throwing everything we have at HLB,” he says. “We don’t have a fall-back position. We are grapefruit growers, and we have to feed this packinghouse (Indian River Exchange Packers).”
Lambeth says he takes after his father in that he is willing to adopt the latest technology and techniques on the farm.
“My father was the first to put in plastic bins and go to all aluminum ladders for canker,” he says. “We were early adopters of optic graders and forced-air cooling in our old packinghouse.”
Because the groves and packinghouse are GlobalGAP certified, the farm has extremely detailed records, which makes tracking what works or doesn’t easier.
“The biggest thing we are doing differently is we are spoon feeding these trees fertility,” he says. “We are not applying the big slugs of ground fertilizer three times per year. We know the roots are getting decimated by HLB, so they can’t catch those big slugs anymore.”
Currently, Lambeth is using only two dry fertilizer applications per year and relying more on fertigation to deliver small splashes of fertilizer.
“I have been going with monthly fertigation, but next year, we are looking to move to bi-weekly or weekly fertigation,” Lambeth says.
Lambeth counts himself fortunate in that he has been applying foliar nutrition for more than 10 years. He believes that gave him a little bit of a cushion when HLB came on the scene.

“Today, we are foliar feeding throughout the year with Plant Food Systems’ line of products,” he says. “Between the fertigation and foliar applications, we are hitting the tops and bottoms of these trees constantly to keep them at optimum nutrient levels.”

Another change related to fertilizer is gable-cut topping the trees. “I don’t think the roots can support much more size of a tree,” he says. “If I showed you the grove where I had my highest yield last season, those trees are 12 feet tall at the peak. We are learning you don’t have to have a big, tall tree to get five and six boxes of yield. We are doing it on tight, compact trees now.”

Lambeth also is evaluating a foliar product Cyan 365. It is an extract of 100% pure seaweed, which claims to improve photosynthesis of trees and promote healthier trees that are more resistant to disease.

“We are willing to try new things in this environment,” Lambeth says. “Some growers on the East Coast have had some promising results with Cyan, so we’ve been testing it on 750 acres of grove. We are seeing some positive results, so we will be applying on more acreage in the coming year.”
Much attention has been paid to foliar nutrition above the ground, more growers are realizing what’s happening with the roots is as — if not — more important that what’s going on up top. In fact, research shows that as much as 30% of a tree’s root system is lost before HLB symptoms appear noticeable in trees.

Recently, a lot of attention has been paid to high bicarbonate levels in irrigation water. Research shows the bicarbonates bind up nutrients and make them less available to the roots. “We are using surface water on so many of these acres, and I always assumed bicarbonates were more of a well water issue,” Lambeth says. “We pulled some samples on the surface water and the levels were through the roof.”

In February, Lambeth began injecting Sparkle, which is a liquid fertilizer designed to treat high levels of bicarbonates in irrigation water and soils. “Every time we irrigate, we are using Sparkle, although we might hold off an application or two after big rains because the acid in the rainwater helps bring surface water levels down.” Lambeth tries to keep his irrigation water pH at 6.7. During dry periods without treatment, the water’s pH can get as high 8.0. “We also have had Syngenta sampling our soil and roots for phytophthora for at least 20 years as part of our Ridomil (mefenoxam) program,” Lambeth says. “That gives us a baseline of what is happening with the roots.” Ninety percent of the citrus tree roots reside in microjet watering pattern. “We are learning more about the roots, but we do know if we are putting out more fertilizer than the roots can absorb or if the bicarbonate levels are binding them up, we are wasting money.”

The Promise Of Planting

If you ask Lambeth what makes him excited about the future, he will tell you it is Indian River Exchange Packers’ 20-month-old 100-acre planting near Ft. Pierce. The trees are responding well to the spoon-fed, intensive management and will be harvested commercially next season. “As a company, we are looking at every block, and if it is not producing, we are snatching it out,” he says. “We are actively replanting and we are going back on sour orange rootstock. Here on the East Coast, we went through the Swingle era, or should I say error.”

Indian River Exchange Packers will be planting 100 acres of lemons this year. “Exchange Packers packs all of the commercial lemons in the state, so it made sense for us to put lemons back in the ground,” Lambeth says. “Plus, it lets us get some packing time in before the grapefruit starts coming in.”

Golden River Fruit Company and Indian River Exchange Packers Snapshot

**President:** George Hamner of Indian River Exchange Packers  
**President:** George Lambeth of Golden River Fruit Company  
**Production Manager:** Scott Lambeth manages his own acreage along with Hamner’s Indian River Exchange groves.  
**Packing:** The Indian River Exchange Packers packed 900,000 4/5 cartons in 2014.