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Plant Pathologist Maribel Enriquez marks a residential tree with yellow paint, denoting it as being within 1,000 ft. of an infected tree. Crews will remove the tree.

Search and Destroy Florida Steps Up the War on Citrus Canker

After a knock on the door or a doorbell ring, someone might shout, "Florida Department of Agriculture — citrus tree inspection!" In most cases, a friendly face comes to the door. Other times, a voice responds through the door or a window. A minute or two of conversation might go by, explaining the need for access to the resident's yard to look for canker. Or, the homeowner knows why the crew is there and simply says, "go ahead" — no need for details.

So go the days for crews fighting the house-to-house combat against citrus canker in South Florida. It is a wearisome but necessary process to find and remove trees infected or exposed to canker — the latest escalation of a five-year program to

halt advancement of an enemy threatening the future of Florida citrus. Search and destroy.

The task is arduous. At the Plantation command center, the morning gathering point for many field survey crews, aerial photographs and maps cover the walls. Grid lines delineate each day's crew activity, but not without a clear and sobering reminder of what still lies ahead. Thousands of individual properties must be surveyed or reinspected — more than a million trees. The job has just begun, and everyone hopes it doesn't get any bigger.

Crews file in as early as 7:00 a.m., checking with supervisors and receiving maps for the day's property inspections. Coordination of so many people — most of them new hires — is perhaps the utmost challenge. Each week, more than 100 people may join the payroll; people move up quickly and promotions are frequent. Senior staffers may have less than a year on the job.

"Experience is critical to doing the job right," explains Gianni Domingus, deputy chief for survey and mapping operations with the state's canker program. A four-year veteran of the canker team, Domingus keeps track of properties to be inspected, or who's house gets an Immediate Final Order — official notice that a chainsaw crew is coming to remove trees. To do their jobs, canker personnel must learn to contend with locked gates, overgrown properties and angry dogs. "Just a few weeks experience makes a big difference," he says.

Destroying infected trees is the only known method of canker eradication. Officials

must also remove any tree with a 1,900 foot radius of a canker find. Those trees may have been exposed to the bacteria that cause the disease.

A Slow and Deliberate Process

The Plantation center serves as headquarters for the residential inspection program, housing personnel from the Florida Department of Agriculture's Division of Plant Industry (DPI), Division of Forestry and the US Department of Agriculture. Recruits attend two days of class instruction on recognizing canker lesions, and then join experienced crews for hands-on training in the field.

Crews look for dark canker lesions surrounded by yellow halos on citrus leaves. "The inspection is not that difficult on a 10-12 foot tree," says Richard Gaskalla, director of the Florida DPI. "If you catch it with the sunlight shining through it, you can see it." If they can, inspection crews try to spot canker before the lesions become that obvious, sometimes identifying an infection on the underside of a single leaf. Once a suspected canker lesion is detected, inspectors ask the crew's plant pathologist to look at the tree to make sure. They draw a map of the yard, recording the find. Samples taken back to the lab usually confirm their suspicions. Says Gaskalla, "Field crews are 90 percent accurate in their canker identifications."

That level of accuracy takes time. From door-to-door, each inspection takes several minutes. "We're lucky to get 25 properties inspected in a day," said a crew leader. Locked gates, yard trash and barking dogs slow the process, but homeowner cooperation is the key to a quick inspection. Domingus says nine out of ten cooperate, depending on how many times we've been in the area. "South Florida residents are tired of the program ... they're sick of seeing us." Residents north of Miami tend to be more cooperative, he adds.

Crew interaction with homeowners is critical to establishing and maintaining continued cooperation through the process. Survey crews set the stage for the relationship. "If that goes poorly," says Domingus, "we have a problem with that homeowner from that point on."

"If a homeowner doesn't cooperate, we have police officers come along to explain why we need to get on the property," says Domingus. "After that we almost always get cooperation."

In those few cases where a homeowner refuses to allow a tree to be removed, law enforcement is dispatched to ensure the safety of a cutting crew. In March, a Miami-area man defending his grapefruit tree pointed a gun at a sheriff deputy. No shots were fired, but officials hauled the elderly resident — in his 90s — to jail. When he returned home hours later, his grapefruit tree was gone.

To help secure homeowner permission, officials offer vouchers good for \$100 in Wal-Mart merchandise. Any homeowner who must sacrifice trees — regardless of the number of citrus trees on the property — is promised a voucher. Residents can use them for buying lawn and garden related merchandise; vouchers may not be used to purchase more citrus trees. Even though some people don't redeem them, the vouchers remain a critical tool for managing community resistance to the program. "If we didn't have the vouchers, we'd be working a lot harder to get cooperation," says Zelma Williams, a division supervisor with the canker program.

FFVA Helps Secure Canker Program Funding

Securing adequate funding for the canker effort, including the voucher program, has been a focus of FFVA's efforts in Washington and Tallahassee. A projected price tag of \$175 million, drawn from state and federal budgets, will pay to get the job done, say officials. FFVA and other industry organizations, have met with USDA Secretary Dan Glickman and key members of Congress to secure funding support.

"This is the time to act," says FFVA President Mike Stuart. "We have to get this eradication program properly funded, with money set aside to make sure we can prevent future outbreaks."

Indeed, the appropriation language includes funding for better detection programs, including a broad sentinel tree monitoring system, and research into finding a treatment for citrus canker.

"This program has been under-funded from day one," says Gaskalla. "We've had to fit the program to the money rather than the money to the program. This is the first time we've had the dollars for what we need to do."

Cautiously optimistic about the program's funding support, canker program officials hire more employees every day. By June 1, they hope to have 1,700 enlisted in the canker war. Contracted tree cutting crews are removing and chipping infected or exposed trees for placement in a landfill. Working in eight or nine man teams, the cutting crews move in a sweep from the north and south canker zone boundaries to contain the outbreak.

If all goes as planned, the program will be completed by this time next year — leaving South Florida with far fewer citrus trees. Reinspections of those that remain will continue for three years.

Will it work? Canker officials believe it will. Grove owners hope they are right. The sheer scope of the new program seems reassuring. Implementing it as planned will be the proof.

With neighborhood searches and an army of tree cutters, Florida's canker eradication efforts have come a long way in the five years since the original Miami-area canker find. Through DNA tests, subsequent canker finds link back to the Miami outbreak. In 1995, the initial risk assessment was to remove all citrus in a 15-square-mile area. "That seemed radical at the time, undoable," remembers Gaskalla. "But if we had done it, where would we be today?"

Canker Communications: A Key to Success

To gauge public opinion on the eradication program, Canker officials contracted with the University of Florida to conduct a survey. Results are reported to be generally positive. New billboards and public service announcements reinforce the need to cooperate with crews, and urge residents to not transport citrus for fear of further spreading the disease.

Canker program officials admit they have critics within Florida's citrus industry. With arguably as much to lose as anyone in this outbreak, some commercial growers have become frustrated with execution of the program. "There may be a false impression that we're not doing much," observes DPI Director Richard Gaskalla.

At the Florida Department of Agriculture, Deputy Commissioner Craig Meyer believes communication with growers should improve as the program gets into full force. "I hope our communications have gotten better," he says. "We've had some valuable constructive criticism, but we appreciate the overall support of the industry."



Roy Powell, president of HydroAge, says retailers and consumers like hydroponic tomatoes.

consumers believe hothouse-grown foods are more attractive and less likely to have chemical residues.

Hydroponics?

An Option for the Future

Grow what people want to buy. That's why Roy Powell, president of HydroAge in Cocoa, is in his third season of hydroponic production. "Before we invested any money in hydroponics, we did some research with retailers and talked with their buyers," said Powell. "The buyer from Albertson's told us hydroponics tomatoes are always among the top 10 selling items in the produce department."

Indeed, consumers are buying hydroponically grown produce, and usually paying higher prices. In a mid-April marketbasket survey of Tallahassee-area retailers, hydroponic tomatoes sold for an average \$2.49 per pound. Comparable field grown tomatoes averaged \$1.62, according to the Florida Department of Agriculture. Many