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# Florida Trend

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## Show's Over

SeaWorld is phasing out its iconic killer whale shows <sup>70</sup>

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# STATEWIDE

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## Life After Citrus

With citrus devastated by greening, some growers are letting their land sit idle. Others are trying new crops.

**The Wheeler family** of central Florida has been in the citrus business for three generations, with about 2,500 acres in groves around the state. Recently, brothers David and Mark planted something new on 95 acres: Peaches.

The spread of citrus greening disease through nearly all of Florida's commercial groves has taken a heavy toll on the state's agri-

cultural sector, which remains synonymous with the state despite comprising only around 2% of Florida's GDP. The amount of acreage in citrus in Florida fell to 480,121 acres last year, down from a high of 665,529 acres and the lowest total since at least 1966, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The amount of fruit harvested has fallen by two-thirds

David Wheeler has recently started growing peaches on former citrus land. It's proved profitable at times, he says, but "it's never going to be a replacement for citrus."

from its peak.

Property appraisers in key citrus counties say growers have turned some groves into pasture land; other groves have been cleared and left idle, with the owners apparently awaiting news of a breakthrough in dealing with the disease. Some acreage has been sold for real estate development.

Some growers have responded by diversifying. Ariel Singerman, an assistant professor and extension economist at the University of Florida's Citrus Research and Education Center, says growers have converted citrus acres to peaches, blueberries and sugar cane.

The changeover to new crops has been incremental. Mercy Olmstead, a former UF associate





**Ken Patterson** has been growing blueberries for more than 30 years. Citrus groves are ideal for planting blueberries, he says.

professor and extension specialist who works with the peach industry, estimates there are 1,500 acres of commercial peaches in Florida, up from 660 acres in 2012.

Meanwhile, the “blueberry business in the last 10 years has exploded in Florida,” says blueberry grower Ken Patterson, who has been growing blueberries in Florida for 32 years, first near Gainesville and more recently in DeSoto County, where he planted blueberries on 200 acres at four former citrus groves. He says citrus groves, with irrigation systems in place, are ideal for blueberries.

In Polk County, which lost 3,586 citrus acres last year, blueberry acreage increased by 61 acres to 1,935, says property appraiser Marsha Faux. “A lot of it is just sitting there,” she says of former grove land. Indeed, some 130,684 acres of citrus groves have been abandoned statewide, a particularly worrying number for remaining growers since abandoned groves, untreated, become hotbeds for the insect that spreads greening.

### A matter of size

Given the industry’s circumstances, only growers with larger operations or the financial means to take a long-term view are inclined to make a fight of it. “The bigger are getting bigger and the small are getting out,” says Lakeland land broker Dean Saunders.

Peaches and blueberries represent only a partial solution for citrus growers. The new crops have certain advantages — peaches can produce fruit after a year,



University of Florida scientists have developed varieties of blueberries and peaches that can flourish with relatively few hours of the cold weather that’s needed to produce fruit — 30 to 40 for some blueberry plants — compared to the 300 hours of “chill” temperatures needed by northern varieties.

### ► Top Citrus Counties

(by acreage)

County	Citrus Acres
Polk	76,455
DeSoto	66,672
Hendry	64,575
Highlands	57,921
Hardee	44,476



### ► Top 3 Counties: Abandoned Citrus Acreage

County	Abandoned Acres
St. Lucie	32,605
Indian River	16,599
Martin	14,737

Source: USDA

## Florida Ag: Big-Picture Trends

### ► Geographical shift

Over time, citrus-growing has shifted farther south and toward the center of the state, driven by development pressure and crop freezes.

### ► Diversification

Along with oranges, grapefruit and other citrus fruit, growers have shifted some land to crops like blueberries and peaches. In part, those moves take advantage of Florida’s growing season and the ability to get crops to market before more-northern growers. They are also a response to greening and other diseases that have devastated citrus.

### ► Economics

Florida’s ag sector, overall, is not large, comprising less than 2% of the state’s economic output. But it remains important to the state — both in terms of providing a diversified economic base and preserving land from development. About 25% of Florida’s total acreage is agricultural.



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for example, while citrus generally takes several years. But there are disadvantages as well. Peach trees can be more labor intensive, requiring pruning and thinning that citrus doesn't. Both blueberries and peaches in Florida are destined for the fresh fruit market, which requires different cultivation practices than Florida oranges, a majority of which go for juice. The crops also have their own pests and issues. Blueberry growers, for instance, have suffered of late from too-warm weather.

"The last two years have definitely been challenging. Even though they don't need much cold weather, they need a little bit," Patterson says. "Some of the new varieties are showing a lot more promise."

The greatest difficulty for Florida blueberries and peaches is that, unlike citrus, they have a limited window of opportunity in the marketplace — a window that

can close due to delays in ripening or harvesting because of weather or the availability of labor. Florida's peach window, for example, opens when the Chilean import season ends in March and shrinks during May once Georgia, South Carolina and California peaches flood the market.

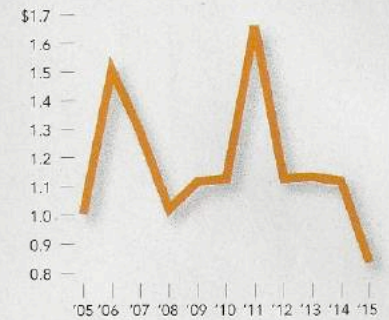
"I don't think that we will ever be as large as Georgia or South Carolina," Olmstead says of peaches, "but it is a nice niche crop that citrus growers can use to generate profit in the face of the negative effects that citrus greening has had on our industry."

## Bidding their time

David Wheeler says he and his brother always have viewed their citrus growing as a strategy to get income from land while waiting for it to become ripe for development. They have sold groves for development since the advent of

## Florida Citrus Value

(fiscal year, in billions)



Note: On-tree sales (return to growers)  
Source: USDA

## No. 1

Florida's rank in production of oranges, fresh market tomatoes, watermelons, grapefruit, fresh market snap beans, fresh market cucumbers and squash

greening. They've also considered planting blueberry bushes and lemon trees. Peaches have proved tasty and, at times, profitable. But "it's never going to be a replacement for citrus," Wheeler says.

They remain committed to citrus, he says, planting trees in their existing groves, though they don't plan new groves and hope for a scientific breakthrough. Says Wheeler, "We are optimistic going forward."



## Protecting Trees

To combat citrus greening, growers are looking to new pest treatments and nutritional care and hoping new varieties prove tolerant or resistant to the disease. Lake Wales' grower Ed Pines and his Precision

Citrus are trying a different tack, inspired by University of Florida scientist Arnold Schumann: Growing trees in mesh enclosures. The 20-foot Citrus Under Protective Screening enclosures not only keep out disease-carrying bugs and pests but also protect against too much sun, hail, wind and citrus canker and allow targeted irrigation and fertilizers, Pines says. His first phase covers 20

acres. He thinks his product will appeal to consumers who value limited use of pesticides and fertilizers. It works abroad, he says. The systems are engineered and made by greenhouse manufacturer ULMA Agricola, a European company for which he's now the U.S. distributor. "We just have to bring it into Florida," Pines says. He says costs vary with the project.



Ed Pines is experimenting with mesh enclosures to protect trees and to allow for more targeted irrigation and fertilization.