Co-Operative Culture of Citrus Groves. Its Advantages to the Individual Owner, to the State, and as a Business

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First, there are very few grove owners who have more than a smattering knowledge of horticulture as a whole; and still fewer of the multitude of details necessary for the most successful raising of the citrus tree for most profitable production and best quality fruit.

At the very beginning, the question of the best variety or varieties for quality, season and market value arises. Then comes the question of best stock, and under what conditions it should be grown. Then comes the numerous diseases and insect pests, many of which can only be identified by an expert, and the method of eradication, or control, prescribed by those of wide experience.

Next comes the excessive cost of maintaining a necessary supply of implements for effectual economic culture, pruning and spraying of small holdings. Still more difficult is it to secure intelligent, interested help, to do the work properly and economically.

In nearly every neighborhood, one can observe the deplorable condition of groves, arising from ignorance, or neglect, or both. It is very bad policy for an owner to try to maintain a property that has cost him from $600 to $1,000 or more per acre, in a condition to produce but one-fourth to one-half its capacity, through avoidable causes. It is poor policy for the State, which is holding out—justly—citrus growing as one of its most inviting prospects.

For several years it has been apparent to the writer, that a better system of fruit production than management by the individual owner must exist, but no plan that would practically meet the conflicting views of the many owners, has been developed.

In November last, when disgust had reached its climax over the difficulties to be overcome in pruning, spraying and fertilizing, the writer determined on working out a plan that would work to the advantage of all.

Mindful of the American citizen's fear and jealousy of any infringement on his personal rights, and yet his growing faith in the principle of, "In union there is strength," and in co-operation, the following agreement was presented to a meeting of neighbors, representing 125 acres. After careful reading and discussion, it was adopted as a basis for organization of the Co-operative Citrus Culture Association. You will note it invites only
those as members who desire their groves cultivated along the lines of the best and latest information. More especially we wish you to note, that after consultation with manager and directors, the owner is left arbiter of his own property, and he alone is by his choice, responsible for results. The following is the agreement:

"Know all men by these presents: That we, the undersigned, citrus growers of Mt. Dora, Lake county, Florida, have associated ourselves together for the purpose of cultivating co-operatively, our citrus groves, and such other fruits and crops as we may determine, according to the best methods known, or that may be known in the future.

We hereby agree to subscribe twenty-five dollars ($25.00) per acre of our holdings; and pay in cash, implements or labor, pro rata per acre, as is necessary to supply our Association with teams, wagons and other tools, implements and machinery, and an emergency fund that the manager and directors may determine necessary for the best and most economical care and cultivation of our properties.

We hereby agree to employ a general manager, who in the judgment of the directors, is the most capable of promoting the best interests of our Association, and producing the most and best fruit and crops possible, under the conditions and climate of our locality.

We hereby agree that the manager shall have the authority, and it is his duty, to hire all help necessary to prosecute the care of our properties for the most successful and economical results; also to discharge such help as may not prove satisfactory, or may not be necessary, from time to time.

It shall be the duty of the manager to have general oversight of the teams, machinery and implements of all kinds, and aid the help in securing comfortable quarters and conditions. It is hereby granted, and shall be the duty, of the manager to inspect each member's property, analyze the conditions, and advise the owner concerning the method and things to be done to secure the best results.

Should there be a difference in judgment between the manager and owner, the owner reserves the right to call the Board of Directors, or other experts in the line of work or treatment involved, at the owner's expense, when such owner shall have the final say as to what and how the work shall be done; the said grower shall then give his special instructions in writing to the manager, and the work shall be done according to such instructions; the manager will file such written instructions, as a record and protection of himself and the Association, from the results of the treatment or work thus arranged.

It is hereby agreed that the business management of this Association shall be left to three owner-members of this Association, and who shall be elected annually, and known as Directors and Horticultural Advisers. They, in co-operation with the general manager, shall have authority to transact all business, and determine in a general way the principles and methods of cultivation; but in no case to impinge on any owner-member's right to final decision, in case of difference of opinion.
The Board of Directors shall elect one of their number as President. The manager, when employed, shall be Secretary, and keep all books and accounts for each grove in the Association.

It is hereby agreed that the labor, team work, etc., shall be charged to each grove owner at cost, including labor plus the closest estimated overhead cost, such as upkeep, manager's salary, etc., pro rata per day or hour. Such charges shall be due and payable as soon as the work is done.

It shall be the duty of the manager to render a bill for the work and expense of each job on each property, and present the same to each owner.

All monies so collected by the manager, shall be credited to the grove or owner thereof, and deposited in the Bank of Mt. Dora, to the account of the Association.

All bills or debts of the Association shall be paid by check of the Association, signed by the President, or other person authorized by the Board of Directors, accompanied by voucher signed by the manager.

We hereby agree to meet on the of each month, or on call by the President, to discuss and determine such matters as are necessary or best. The Directors shall also meet at the request of the manager, or of any member whose success may depend upon their action. The manager shall make a report on any or all matters of work, conditions and finances; and the books and accounts of the Association shall be audited every three months. In Association matters, a two-thirds vote of members, and a two-thirds vote of Directors (two Directors and the manager shall constitute a quorum), shall decide any matters as to acts or policy of the Association.

Signatures and acreage signed here.

The more the project was discussed, the more it became apparent, that the success of the plan depended upon selection of the right man as manager. The manager must be a broad man. He must not only have technical and mechanical knowledge, but good organizing ability, tact in handling men, and a well developed business capacity, with enthusiasm for success of the plan.

Temporary officers were elected, and the President authorized to advertise for a manager. Forty-five applicants was the result of the advertisement. A committee was selected to investigate the qualifications of the applicants. On their report, a decision was made, Mr. E. E. Truskett of Montverde being selected. He took charge on February 1st, 1920.

After three months of practical working of our plan, we are proud to say that there has never been a criticism of the plan, and every member is more than pleased with the results.

Under practical working conditions, we have found it necessary to change some minor points. For example we found it best to make a charge of fifty cents per month to cover unknowable overhead costs, and manager's salary.

Again, to cover lost time from weather and the unavoidable lost time of teams, it has been found best to charge members twenty-five cents per day over actual wage of men, and twenty-five cents a day on team work over exact cost, and thus accumulate a small surplus. Should
this amount to more than the reserve 
fund required, it will be rebated to grow-
ers in proportion to work done, at the 
end of each year.

We found our charge of $25.00 per 
acre had been entirely consumed in the 
purchase of teams, harness, spraying ma-
chines, disc and other harrows, etc., in-
cluding a Ford truck for use of the mana-
ger, and for transporting the men and 
tools from place to place. We would ad-
vice a new organization to make a charge 
of $30.00 per acre, thus insuring a re-
serve fund.

We find it best to work men and teams 
in crews, under a manager or foreman, 
thus the work is done directly under the 
guidance of the man who is responsible 
for results. The manager determines 
by inspection, the groves where work 
must be done first, thus securing to each 
member as prompt attention as necessary. 
We try to buy fertilizer, feed, etc., in 
quantity, in the cheapest market.

So far, I believe all our members are 
members of the Florida Citrus Exchange, 
indicating, perhaps, the influence of co-
operation through its education; how-
ever, as 95 per cent of the fruit in this 
vicinity belongs to the Exchange, our 
packing house putting up no fruit for 
independents, it might be different in a 
community of independents. In any case, 
we believe we are an influence leading to 
exchange ideas.

Our first idea for organization, was to 
do so under the charter of the Florida 
Citrus Exchange, which includes "cul-
tivation" as well as marketing. As the 
plan is yet only local, and would not be-
come general over the State at once, we 
decided to get a common stock charter,
to be operated on co-operative lines, one 
share for each acre or fraction. This will 
allow us to do any kind of business that 
may seem best, and work for non-mem-
ers, should we have surplus help, or idle 
teams, all profits being credited to the 
Association account.

In the development of our plan we not 
only secure skillful and scientific culture 
of our groves, but are offered the co-
operation of the University at Gaines-
ville, which will give us the services of 
their corps of experts on insects and dis-
eases of citrus groves; they will come 
and examine them, and work with our 
manager and foremen in securing the best 
that is known in culture and protection. 
If necessary or desirable, the University 
will hold two short sessions a year for 
training managers and foremen, and any 
others interested in the work, to promote 
knowledge of citrus culture.

Through this co-operation of the Uni-
versity's laboratory experts, working in 
the field with manager and foremen, our 
movement can develop into a real prac-
tical school of citrus culture, and our 
motto—"More and Better Fruit"—will 
have back of it the best intelligence of 
the State.

Already our plan has brought requests 
from prospective owners of groves, and 
people who wish to become permanent 
residents of our State, to be enrolled as 
workers in groves under the Association's 
care, that they may learn the proper meth-
ods of profitable grove care.

Already visitors have purchased prop-
erties because they could have them cared 
for by the Association, and they would not 
have purchased had they not been able
to secure such service. This satisfaction to investors will be a strong card in development of the State. It is our aim to give employment to as intelligent and interested help as possible, in order to secure the greatest efficiency.

*Is the scheme practical for state-wide application?*

We believe that all communities where there are holdings of fifty acres or less each, and have a co-operative spirit, can do their work better and cheaper collectively, comparing income with expense, and with less anxiety and trouble to owner than where it is done individually.

The same tools and machinery must be used for twenty as for seventy-five acres. We have members with 1 to 60, 80 and 100 acres of grove. The latter furnish all their own tools, machinery and help, and a foreman, and pay the Association fifty cents per acre per month for the manager’s inspection, and buys one share of stock for each 20 acres or less, to help defray cost of running manager’s car.

So far it seems best that each Association should occupy the territory that utilizes one packing house. A good live manager can, after some experience, with the aid of good *working* foremen, probably inspect and direct the work on 1,000 acres. The acreage covered by one manager should constitute one “unit.” By cooperation of units, practically the same perfection of culture and management would be secured for all.

Whether a co-operation of units throughout the State may redound to the benefit of all, will have to be worked out by experience. It would seem, however, that a meeting of managers and foremen, say twice a year, with the University experts and an exchange of experiences would add greatly to practical knowledge.

Prof. Rolfs has expressed the wish that fifty such units be formed within five years, as there is a large number of young men developing for such work. We leave the matter for your consideration.