



History and Current Status of Citrus in Putnam County, Florida

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Putnam County was originally one of the top citrus producing counties in the late 1800s. After freezing temperatures, an increasing demand for ferns and the purchase of agricultural land in central and south Florida, dooryard citrus is primarily what remains today. The world of citrus has changed in northeast Florida, but that has not stopped small groves and homeowners from growing this iconic fruit. Citrus greening is the most serious threat to the remaining citrus acreage in the county. Commercial citrus production in Putnam County is limited to the extreme southern part of the county, concentrated in the Crescent City area. The number of boxes produces is lumped together with Citrus, Palm Beach and Pinellas Counties. These four counties, combined, represent 138,000 of the 124,030,000 boxes of citrus produced statewide in 2013–14.

Citrus was first introduced to Florida by the Spanish between 1513 and 1565 (Jackson and Davies, 1999). Orange trees were planted in St. Augustine on Anastasia Island. The native Americans planted sour orange seeds in clumps, which are now referred to as groves. By 1655, Spaniards were developing the Palatka area. It was a stopping point on the way to the slaughter houses in St. Augustine where cattle could graze and hydrate. The Seminole tribe gave the city's name which translates to "cow's crossing" (Putnam County Chamber of Commerce, 2015). By January 1853, the City of Palatka was chartered by the State of Florida. It had become the major center for transportation, including the steam boat industry, lumber, citrus, livestock, and tourism on the St. Johns River.

Citrus became abundant all throughout Putnam County, but the vast majority of acreage was focused in the southeast portion of the county, also known as the Fruitland Peninsula. The peninsula includes Crescent City, Fruitland and Welaka. This area included half of the state's wild-orange acreage, which was eventually converted into cultivated, commercial groves worthy of profits (Webb, 1885). The Fruitland Peninsula was chosen for citrus growing due to the climate and soils. Buffered between the St. Johns River and Crescent Lake, temperatures are mild during the winter, and the area tends to be safe from freezing temperatures. This is a great advantage for growers in regards to winter protection. The soils are a mixture of Spodosols and Entisols, with the majority of Spodosols being within river and lake front properties (Readle, 1985). Both soil types are slightly acidic in the area, with the Entisols having better drainage, and groves being primarily focused on this type of soil.

By 1890, the citrus industry comprised of 114,800 acres within Orange, Alachua, Volusia, Marion, Lake, Putnam, Hillsborough, Pasco, Brevard, and Polk Counties (Jackson and Davies, 1999). Counties are listed in descending order. By 1894, Interlachen, a city just west of Palatka, was second in the state with regards to number of shipped boxes. Immigrants continued to move into

Putnam County with hopes of taking part in the citrus industry. Part of the popularity came from the marketing strategies using the packing crates. Growers became very artistic and unique with their logos on the crates. The "Belle of Crescent City" brand still exists today on Crescent City's banner as travelers enter town on State Road 17.

During the late 1800s, one of our most popular tangerines was grafted in Putnam County by Colonel Francis L. Dancy in Orange Mills; a small town just east of East Palatka before entering St. Johns County. Col. Dancy wanted an easy peel tangerine that was sweet, and contained few seeds (Crouch, 2015). He discovered the tangerine on a mandarin tree, and chose to graft it on sour orange root stock (Jackson and Futch, 1994). Col. Dancy dispersed seedlings to other groves in the 1870s, including the Mays Grove in Orange Mills and the Rembert Grove on Drayton Island. The breeding effort was conducted while he served as the State Geologist and State Engineer. The colonel was inducted into the Citrus Hall of Fame in 2013. Thanks to his breeding efforts, the 'Dancy' Tangerine is still popular today in Putnam County as a commercial product and as dooryard citrus.

Drayton Island consists of about 1700 acres, and is found south of Georgetown, and east of Salt Springs. This island is isolated within the St. Johns River, just north of Lake George, and the Rembert Grove is located there. This grove contained premium fruit, with a premium price tag for its oranges. The Rembert Grove was said to be one of the "finest and most successful groves," (Owen et al., 1902). This is one of the oldest groves in Putnam County, and is only accessible by boat or ferry. Currently, residential homes are present with dooryard citrus still existing.

Florida citrus growers became aware of the consequences of freezing temperatures in 1835, and then made efforts to use rootstocks that were more tolerant of freeze events. However, inclement weather struck again in 1894–95 that eliminated almost 95% of producing citrus trees. After the 1894–95 freezes, most of the citrus industry moved south into Orange, Lake and Butler Counties due to the increased survival of citrus in those areas (Jackson and Davies, 1999). The demand for other crops filled in the gaps for producers in Putnam County, including ferns, cabbage, potatoes and lumber. Recently, growers are producing

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stone fruit, small fruits and cut foliage such as peaches, muscadine grapes, blackberries and magnolias.

As of 2015, there are five citrus producers left in Putnam County. Three are located in Crescent City, and two are in Pomona Park. Two of producers in Crescent City are organic growers. Citrus greening disease, or Huanglongbing, was first discovered in Putnam County in 2009. Diagnostic tests confirmed its presence in Palatka and Crescent City. Residential clientele regularly bring in citrus samples to the Putnam County Cooperative Extension office with fears of having this disease on their citrus trees. More often than not, the observed symptoms are due to nutrient deficiencies. However, in 2014, a dooryard tree was confirmed with citrus greening in East Palatka by analysts at the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. Efforts by the county agent are now focused on awareness and pest management through the use of newsletters and public classes.

Putnam County, Florida was once one of the most popular counties for citrus production. Currently, Putnam is responsible for a very low amount, $3.0 \times 10^{-4}\%$, of commercial citrus acreage in the state. In production, Putnam contributes 1750 boxes. That number is in combination with Citrus, Palm Beach and Pinellas Counties (Agriculture By the Numbers, 2013). That is a drop from 2240 boxes in 2010; just after the discovery of citrus greening. The citrus species present include oranges, seedless grapefruit, tangerines and lemons. Being so far north, there are a limited number of citrus species that can tolerate our cold winters.

As long as citrus trees are still available for purchase, local homeowners still attempt to grow this iconic fruit. Its existence in this county is largely based on dooryard production, which has also declined over the years due to lack of fertilization and

pest management problems. The majority of samples that arrive at the Putnam County Cooperative Extension office are from dooryard citrus trees. Unfortunately, one of the most effective chemical treatments of the citrus greening disease vector, *Diaphorina citri*, is under scrutiny because of its impacts on bees. The news media has caused homeowners to be fearful of using neonicotinoids, and therefore making it easier for citrus to be infected with diseases. From here, awareness and research-based education is our best tool for defense.

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