The Art of the Sale—An Early History of Marketing Tropical Fruit in South Florida

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From the beginning of tropical fruit production in South Florida in the early 1900s, fruit growers and packers used colorful labels on fruit crates to advertise their produce. Paper crate labels were designed to draw attention to produce boxes and make them stand out at public markets. Labels with color and interesting graphics became an innovative way for growers to differentiate their products from competitors. But by the 1950s, pre-printed cardboard boxes had replaced the use of paper labels on wooden packaging. Since then, unused crate labels have become collector’s items. Examples of crate labels from Miami-Dade County are shown.

Beginning in the late 1800s, packing houses and growers associations used colorful paper labels pasted on the ends of wooden crates to advertise their produce. Since fruits and vegetables were shipped throughout the United States, competition forced the produce industry to find ways to make their products stand out at the market. This advertising art was created from a wide range of iconographic images to catch the eye of buyers and consumers.

The Florida Department of Agriculture began registering produce labels in 1931. These labels informed the buyer about the grade of the produce, as well as the grower and packer information. The name or color background of the label stood for the grade. For example, blue represented Grade A (Fig. 1), red was Grade B (Fig. 2) and yellow or green denoted mixed grade (Fig. 3) (Chicone Jr. & Burnette 1996).

Citrus fruit and tomato labels are the most familiar but there are a few examples of labels for South Florida tropical fruits, such as avocados and mangos (Fig. 4). To reduce costs, printers would create generic labels and later printed the brand name of the producer (Anon 2007). The graphics used in the Flagler Grove

Fig. 1. Silver Palm Citrus Growers Association, an example of an early label. The blue background notified the buyer that the fruit was Grade A. Probably 1930s-1940s. Image: FL Southern College Archives.

Fig. 2. A lime and avocado label from the 1950s, Grade B fruit. Sub-Tropic Fruit Co. was located at Goulds, FL. Image: Chicone Label collection, <http://ufdc.ufl.edu/citruslabel>.

Fig. 3. A citrus label from the 1920s, mixed grade fruit. Image: Chicone Label collection, <http://ufdc.ufl.edu/citruslabel>.
(Fig. 5) and Biscayne (Fig. 6) labels were used for a multitude of Florida citrus labels. Another cost saving method was using the same graphic for multiple labels. In Fig. 7, the same graphic of a bunch of limes appears in the majority of lime labels.

After World War II, there was less emphasis on printing interesting designs and many used simple bold lettering without an image (Fig. 8, Fig. 9). By the mid-1950s, pre-printed cardboard boxes had replaced the use of paper labels on wooden packaging. Since then, unused crate labels have become collector’s items. Rare examples of crate labels sell for $30 to over $100 apiece.

The P. K. Yonge Library at the University of Florida has the most comprehensive collection of Florida crate labels and they are available on the Internet at <http://ufdc.ufl.edu/citruslabel>.

**Literature Cited**
