AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL HORTICULTURE INDUSTRY IN MANATEE COUNTY AND ITS IMPACT ON STATEWIDE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract. Several nursery owners in Manatee County were pioneers in the nursery industry in Florida. Pliny Reasoner began the nursery industry in Florida in 1881, and became known throughout the world for the exotic plants his nursery had collected. Other pioneers grew interior plants, cut flowers, native plants, sod, and turf grass plugs. The landscape contracting and maintenance business grew fast in the 1950s and 1960s as population growth occurred. The University of Florida Research and Extension Service has grown to serve the industry from the 1950s to present. Today the landscape industry income exceeds the wholesale nursery income in Manatee County and statewide. Trends of industry being dominated by large chain stores are likely to continue.

The Environmental Horticulture Industry, a truly inclusive farm and city industry, was featured in 2002 during the Farm City Week Celebration in Manatee County. This industry is a clean growth industry, and is comprised of thousands of varieties of flowering crops, exotic foliage plants, woody landscape plants, field-grown trees, native plants, and sod crops, along with the landscape contracting and maintenance businesses. The objective of this manuscript is to document the scope and size of the industry in Manatee County, and formally acknowledge some of the major contributors to its development in Manatee County and statewide.

Manatee County ranks 10th in Florida in sales from wholesale and retail nursery plants, landscape contracting and maintenance services, for a total of $161 million in sales. Statewide, the environmental horticulture industry has grown from $5.9 billion in 1997 to $9.9 billion in 2000 (Hodges, 2002). The state of Florida ranks 1st or 2nd in the United States in production of most types of plants. It is an industry that produces plants which improve the environment, as well as makes it more enjoyable.

Ornamental crops are grown in greenhouses, in shade houses or in open fields, depending on the environmental requirements of the individual plant species. Plants are important to us as human beings, because an acre of trees absorbs enough carbon dioxide from the atmosphere annually to equal the amount produced by driving a car 26,000 miles (Nowak). Landscape plants remove smoke, dust, and other pollutants from the air. Plant transpiration of indoor plants in an office environment releases moisture, creating a humidity level exactly matching the recommended human comfort zone, ranging from 30-60% (FNGA, 2002).

Landscaping can add 7-15% to a home’s value (Harris, 1983). Landscaping before a home is sold may bring a recovery value of 100-200%, and it may make your home sell faster (FNGA, 2002). A single mature tree can absorb carbon dioxide at the rate of 48 lb per year and release enough oxygen into the atmosphere to support two human beings (McAliny, 1993).

The Manatee County industry began in 1881, when Reasoner’s Nursery was started by Pliny Reasoner. This is the oldest nursery in continuous operation in Florida today. Pliny’s brother, Egbert joined him in a few years, and the nursery became known all over the world for the exotic plants they had collected and for their marketing of a Foster pink grapefruit discovered in a grove in Oneco (Farm City Week Records). Among the Reasoner introductions are crotons, orchid trees, bottlebrush, bougainvillea, mangos, and others. Eric Golby, a well-known hibiscus breeder, worked with Reasoner for many years, and was recognized for his leadership in the Hibiscus Society and the introduction of many new hibiscus varieties (Reasoner, 1885-6).

Blaser’s Nursery, in Manatee County, was one of the first in Florida to market indoor foliage plants to the “5 and 10 cent” stores in the late 1930s and 1940s. They patented a “Baby Doll” Cordyline, and also sold philodendron, pothos, dieffenbachia, ferns and other tropical species. In the 1950s Blaser’s started the interior plant leasing business and franchising of a business which today is the third largest plant leasing business in the United States (J. Blaser, Blaser’s Nursery, personal communication).

Manatee Fruit Company, under the leadership of Walter Preston and family, was another pioneer foliage grower. Walter’s grandfather had started in the citrus business in 1892 in Manatee County. Walter’s father started growing gladiolus for cut flowers in 1937. In the 50s and 60s Walter began growing cut chrysanthemums, potted flowers and then foliage plants (Waters, 1969). They are currently one of the leading flower producers in Florida. Lawrence Dirr was also one of the first to grow gladiolus in the state. The Florida gladiolus growers association was first headquartered in Bradenton (Farm City Week Records).

During the 1950s, potted blooming plants became a large segment of interior plant usage. Light manipulation was used.
to control the blooming time of mums and poinsettias. James Nanney, formerly with Roman J. Claproom, Old Sun City, and later of Nanney’s Greenhouses, Terra Ceia, demonstrated the proper light levels and storage temperatures to hold cut mums for shipping, and the use of cold storage for breaking dormancy of gladiolus corms (Farm-City Week Records). Brouwer’s Flowers, Terra Ceia, began in 1965 and was the first in this area to use labor-saving rolling benches (F. Brouwer, Brouwer’s Flowers, pers. comm.). Otto Bundy and George Lawrence developed Horticultural Systems in 1974 and pioneered the transplant production of sea oats, smooth cordgrass, and other salt tolerant plants for beach erosion control (O. Bundy, Eco-group, personal communication). Wayne Meade started Suncoast Native Plants at approximately the same time and grew mangroves. The nurseries were two of the first to grow native plants for beaches and dunes, salt marsh areas, and wetlands. Both nurseries continued to grow more species of native plants, and helped develop the native plant industry statewide.

Horticultural Systems developed the first native plant micropropagation facility in Florida which enables production of many true to type plants and eliminates field-harvesting. Aurora Environmental, under Mr. Wayne Reid’s direction, was an early contributor to micropropagation technology. Native plant nurseries contribute about $10 million to the Manatee County economy, and provide a local source for native plants for landscaping.

This county’s sod industry began in the 1950s when ranchers started selling their Bahia pasture grass for lawn use. In the 1960s, Walter Pursley began growing St. Augustine grasses in Manatee County specifically to harvest for sod. He also developed a dwarf variety, Seville, that required less mowing. He started growing Zoysia and Bermuda for golf courses and athletic fields. The construction of the Sunshine Skyway Bridge opened the market for Manatee County sod to be shipped to Pinellas County for sale. By 1974, there was a Princeton machine that cut sod, and placed it on a conveyor belt for workers to stack the sod pieces on pallets. Mr. Pursley also started the grass plug business in the 1970s (W. Pursley, Sr., Pursley’s Sod, personal communication).

Mr. Bill Orban established a chrysanthemum farm on Cortez Rd. in 1954, and in the early 1960s began growing poinsettias. Poinsettias were grown in open shade houses. His son, Marty, joined the business in 1975. They built the first ebb and flow irrigation system in the state in 1982, and they are currently one of the largest producers in the state. They now also grow many different annual flowers and roses as well. (Bill and Marty Orban, Orban’s Nursery, personal communication).

The retail nursery business was mostly family-owned businesses until the late 60s, when the chain store business started slowly becoming more prominent in the retail nursery industry. Now there are fewer independent retail nurseries. Also, the related lawn mower business has changed somewhat in the same manner.

The landscape contracting and maintenance business paralleled the growth of the woody ornamental nurseries. The maintenance business has grown especially fast since the 1950s as population growth occurred. Today, landscape maintenance and contracting businesses have more sales than the wholesale nursery industry both in Manatee County and statewide. Wholesale nursery sales are $45 million, landscape services have $57 million in sales, and retailers have $59 million in sales, which makes the total sales of $161 million in Manatee County (Hodges, 2002).

Since 1942, when the first ornamental research program was initiated, the Gulf Coast Research and Education Center, Bradenton, has made many significant scientific contributions to the statewide industry. Major scientific accomplishments have been made in such areas as insect, disease, nematode, virus, and weed identification and control (Waters, 1990). They have also made significant advancements in plant nutrition, breeding, genetics, plant cultural methods, water quality and quantity management, soil fumigation, cultivar evaluations, post harvest handling, greenhouse design, tissue culture, agricultural economics, and air pollution management (Anonymous, 2000; Waters, 1969).

The Manatee County Extension Service has taken research results to local people in the environmental horticulture industry by providing programs and information to increase production and efficiency. The University of Florida ornamental horticulture extension program was begun in the 1940s by Fred P. Lawrence, Citriculturist. Dr. E. W. McElwee was the first Extension Horticulturist. He was hired in 1953, and the first extension advisory committees were formed in 1959. The first short courses for landscape nursery owners were held in 1963. In 1967, the first multi county extension agent was hired in Jacksonville (McElwee, 1970).

Today in Manatee County as well as statewide, most nurseries are being good stewards of our natural resources by conserving water for the future, and they are employing improved programs and practices including slow release fertiliation, water conservation, soil testing, nutrient monitoring, and other technology to improve both plant quality and the surrounding environment. Some are using beneficial insects and pesticides that are less toxic to beneficial insects so fewer pesticides are used in our environment. They all have a vested interest in having a clean environment for all of our children.

In summary, Manatee County ornamental producers, allied industries and organizations have a rich history of contributions toward the advancement of ornamental and environmental horticulture in the state of Florida.

**Literature Cited**


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