

News from the Watershed

Some Interesting Facts About Citrus.

Even though Florida is known for being one of the largest citrus producers, the citrus tree is not native to the Sunshine State! It is believed that Christopher Columbus introduced citrus to the new world. But let's go back even further. Beginning in Southeast Asia, it is believed that emperors and peasants alike, enjoyed the fruit in ancient China and later Japan. Over the years, traders carried the fruit to the Middle East, Africa, Greece and Rome. Once the Portuguese developed and exported the sweeter fruit (prior to that the fruit was quite bitter) citrus trees began to pop up all over the Mediterranean.

Florida's climate and sandy soils are excellent for growing citrus. The first Europeans planted citrus seeds and groves began to be established. The industry continued to expand over the centuries and today, citrus is one of Florida's largest businesses. In fact, most of the orange juice sold in the United States comes from Florida. The Sunshine State has approximately 100 million orange and grapefruit trees on 800,000 acres in 31 counties. In addition, over 90,000 people work for the citrus industry. Florida citrus is a \$9 billion industry, producing more oranges than any other region of the world, except Brazil, and leading in grapefruit production. The business generates approximately \$1 billion in tax revenues, which helps support schools, highways and healthcare services.

Besides helping out by supporting these necessary services, the citrus industry helps the environment. New grove designs allow large areas of land to provide wildlife habitat and a buffer between development and the grove. Many species of native wildlife live in the groves and mature citrus trees produce oxygen. Research has shown that for every acre of mature trees, 16.7 tons of oxygen is produced per year.

So, we can see that the citrus industry provides jobs for over 90,000 people, pays taxes, provides food, houses wildlife and has a major economic impact on our beautiful state. But did you know that citrus is also very good for you? Calcium fortified citrus juice can aide with healthy bones, help to prevent osteoporosis and reduce the risk of some cancers. In addition, the vitamins contained in the citrus are associated with reduced risk for depression, age-related dementia or Alzheimer's disease, stroke and heart disease. Orange juice is also said to assist in lowering blood pressure and cholesterol levels. Vitamin C plays a role in a healthy pregnancy and assists children with improved school performance and attendance, due to a healthier body. Over 90 percent of Florida's oranges are squeezed for juice.

Here are some more interesting citrus facts:

For an orange tree to bear fruit, it needs to be about five years old. A mature tree can produce over 1,000 oranges at a time. For most of its life, the orange fruit is actually a greenish color. The temperature is a factor in the color of the peel. But even if the orange is green on the outside, it may be juicy, ripe and sweet on the inside.

Citrus by-products are also used in the production of other items such as food flavoring, perfume and soaps, cooking oil and salad dressings, ice cream, slushes, wine, cosmetics, bug sprays, tea, bakery products, paints and varnishes.

Many Florida citrus growers are great conservationists and have started a program called "Best Management Practices". Being good land managers, they want to conserve water and have gone to more efficient irrigation systems and use up to 88 percent less water than they did 20 years ago. This is a major contribution in water conservation.

For more information on citrus and other agriculture practices, please visit our website at <http://www.highlandsswcd.org/>.