

4-H CITRUS TREE PROJECT CULTIVATES FUTURE LEADERS

Gary England, Fruit Crops EA III, Lake Cty



Mr. Robert Lommerse received awards during the 2016 Central Florida 4 H Citrus Tree Project Blue Ribbon Judging and Auction.

If Florida's citrus industry is to continue to grow beyond the current crisis of citrus greening, it will need experienced and knowledgeable leaders in the future. While the research, education and extension divisions of UF/IFAS have been fully engaged in finding answers to the problem of greening disease and routing them to stakeholders, Florida 4-H, extension's youth development program, has been assisting the industry by cultivating its next generation of leaders and problem-solvers.

The Central Florida 4 H Citrus Tree Project has been in operation in various formats and under the direction of several UF/IFAS citrus extension agents over the years. Throughout all of these iterations, the project has had one underlying goal: identifying and encouraging youth who will one day be involved in the Florida citrus industry as trained employees and leaders.

Participants in the project purchase a citrus tree and five-gallon pot in the spring; using information learned in project workshops and gained in their own research, over the course of a year they grow a citrus tree that meets the specifications required at a pre-judging event in early spring. Those trees judged to meet blue ribbon status by industry judging are eligible to compete for best tree by age group as well as for overall Grand and Reserve-Grand Champions. After judging, all trees are eligible to be auctioned off to the highest bidder.

Underlying but very significant aspects of the project include keeping a record book containing all activities in the project, as well as skills learned about citrus, its pests, the importance of the citrus industry to the economy of Florida and the potential for related career choices. Citrus skills are enhanced by participation in project workshops, field days and research of resources provided on the project website.

Coinciding with pre-Judging in early spring, project books are collected for judging by age groups, as are skills through a rigorous test of sample identification, citrus knowledge and relating impacts of the citrus industry on the Florida economy. Results of these competitions are a significant portion of determining the recipient of the Jim Yates Memorial Horticulturalist Award.

An additional activity in the project is the John Jackson 4-H Scholarship, managed through the state 4-H office and granted to deserving scholastic Junior and Senior participants who plan pursue post-secondary education.

Since this agent became the coordinator of the project, there have been several outstanding participants who consistently demonstrated exemplary performance in growing their citrus trees, excelling in the project books and citrus skills activities. One of the most outstanding participants in the project during this time frame is Mr. Robert Lommerse from Seminole County.

As a participant in the 4-H Citrus Tree Project for several years, Robert has proven to be an exemplary participant. Some of his achievements include being awarded first place in age group for the skills and project book, as well as growing multiple Reserve Grand Champion citrus trees. He was also selected as the 2015 recipient of the John Jackson Scholarship.

In addition to his exemplary performance in the project, Robert has served as a mentor to newer participants in the project. His guidance and example as a participant has helped to foster success for numerous participants from his home county and he has had the opportunity to expand his reach as a mentor by holding county and state-wide officer positions..

Robert has expressed a desire to go above and beyond the citrus project in learning about the industry. His goals include learning about citrus propagation and experimenting with thermotherapy as a potential treatment for HLB-infected trees. I was thrilled to learn that he has chosen to attend Florida Southern College to further his education in citrus.

The agent has provided a letter of support for Mr. Lommerse to attain the Freshman & Transfer Student Scholarship for Students in Citrus and Horticultural Science. Students such as Mr. Lommerse will be a benefit to their eventual employers as well as the citrus industry as a whole in being sustainable in the HLB era.

UF/IFAS Extension Comings and Goings is a monthly newsletter distributed by the Office of the Dean for Extension via e-mail and on the UF/IFAS Extension web site at <http://extadmin.ifas.ufl.edu>.