A fresh perspective from Peter Chaires

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE:
- The state of citrus fruit drop
- New acid citrus selections
- Southern Gardens Citrus research
- Nematodes in HLB groves
- Leaf tissue and soil sampling
A fresh perspective

Peter Chaires has taken on big roles for fresh fruit and new varieties.

By Ernie Neff

There's a style contrast between the current executive vice president of Florida Citrus Packers, Peter Chaires, and his predecessor, the late Richard Kinney. "Their personalities are quite different — almost exact opposites," says Dan Richey, president of Riverfront Packing. "Peter is a focused, quiet operator. He remains on task with everything he has in front of him. He is a hard worker and diligent in his duties."

Some of those descriptions may also apply to Kinney, but "quiet" doesn't. Kinney, who died in January, was often heard laughing loudly or telling someone — with raised, agitated voice — why his position on an issue was the right one.

Chaires is sometimes described as "collegial." Kinney was sometimes referred to as "a bulldog."

Several years ago, Chaires began managing business development, market access and food safety projects for Florida Citrus Packers under Kinney's supervision. He also helped establish New Varieties Development & Management Corp. (NVDMC), and serves as its executive director. He succeeded Kinney as Packers chief in 2012.

"Clearly, Peter had some big shoes to fill following Richard," Richey says. Chaires credits Kinney for helping him succeed. "Richard Kinney was a great friend, mentor and ally," Chaires says. "I learned a great deal from him."

Chaires also has learned from other association chiefs of staff; he cites Duke Chadwell (Citrus Administrative Committee), Doug Bournique (Indian River Citrus League), Mike Sparks (Florida Citrus Mutual), Mike Stuart (Florida Fruit and Vegetable Association) and Ron Hamel (Gulf Citrus Growers Association).

PACKERS ISSUES

A major Florida Citrus Packers objective is maintaining access to key domestic and export markets, Chaires says. The association works with researchers and regulatory agencies on that front.
Expanding export opportunities is also vital. "Japan, the EU (European Union) and Korea represent major markets, but we are working with the FDOC (Florida Department of Citrus) on other potential export opportunities," Chaires says.

Food safety, another major issue, requires work on third-party audits, good agricultural practices and federal regulations. Chaires works with the Indian River Citrus League and a food safety working group on these challenges.

Chaires says fresh orange demand has recently received a boost from increased demand for fresh-squeezed juice produced at the retail level. "Florida Citrus Packers maintains close ties with this segment and continuously explores ways to leverage this trend," he says.

Florida's fresh fruit industry has contracted drastically in recent years, Chaires points out. "When I was first associated with Florida Citrus Packers, we had 88 packinghouses," he says. "We now have 22 packing members and four marketing members."

"I don't know of anyone who has worked any harder or cared about our industry more than Peter. Having said that, Peter sure likes to hold meetings; maybe he just likes writing minutes."
— Duke Chadwell, Citrus Administrative Committee manager

**NEW VARIETIES**

"The availability and success of new varieties is critical to the resurrection of Florida's citrus industry," Chaires declares. "Growers in the fresh specialty and orange markets need varieties that meet changing consumer preferences."

Current consumer preferences include specialty fruit that's easy to peel and seedless. "We have made significant investments in the development of easy-peeling seedless (or low-seeded) tangerine/mandarins," Chaires says. Several years ago, NVDMC moved the University of Florida-IFAS (UF-IFAS) Sugar Belle (a mandarin hybrid) into the commercial market; it was followed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Early Pride tangerine. There are now 16 UF-IFAS selections in some phase of the NVDMC's Fast Track program aimed at getting new varieties into commercial use quickly (see "Fast Track" sidebar) "More IFAS and USDA mandarins are in the bullpen," Chaires says.

"Grapefruit growers face entirely different challenges," Chaires says. "Florida's grapefruit quality is unrivaled in the world. The most important factor for grapefruit growers is disease tolerance or the ability to maintain quality and production in an HLB world. Secondarily, we are funding research to expand available grapefruit maturities and provide new high-quality, attractive variety options."

"For many of Florida's packinghouses and the growers who supply them, new varieties will play a critical role in maintaining capacity and eventually restoring volume," Chaires says.

**PROFILE:**

Peter Chaires

**Born:** 1965 in Bradenton as an eighth-generation Floridian

**Education:** BS in organizational behavior from University of Florida's Warrington College of Business Administration, 1988; MBA from Rollins College’s Crummer Graduate School of Business, 1994

**Family:** Wife, Kimberly; sons Jacob and Lucas; stepson Dalton

**Previous jobs:** 15 years with the Florida Gift Fruit Shippers Association, completing his tenure as executive vice president; two years consulting and managing his business services firm

**Hobbies/interests:** Fishing ("I can get close to God and do a deep-down recharge while the water laps against the boat."); University of Florida football games; mini-vacations with his wife; his men's Bible study group ("It's an integral part of my life."); president of the Alpha Gamma Rho (a social professional fraternity) alumni organization
On the juice side, NVDMC supports research and release programs to make high-quality oranges available throughout the processing season. "The IFAS Valquarius, early-maturing Valencia was our first supported variety, but the OLL oranges and upcoming IFAS early-maturing Valencia are also part of this work," Chaires says. NVDMC has worked with USDA's Agricultural Research Service to establish trials of orange-like hybrids with flavor profiles similar to orange, but which show heightened levels of disease tolerance. "Processed orange options are expanding, and growers are taking notice," Chaires says.

UF-IFAS researchers Bill Castle, Fred Gmitter and Jude Grosser have been heavily involved in the new varieties quest. Castle says Chaires is highly supportive and "doesn't just speak support. Peter actively searches for funds. He is very savvy in the ways of the citrus industry and is well connected ... Peter has always seemed to me to be the right person at the right time ... to help guide the Florida citrus industry through this era of cultivar management."

"Peter is very technical by nature. He can absorb a 100-page document for breakfast and still be ready for a normal course of business. He is a great sounding board for me and can cut through the clutter to the heart of the matter."

— Cody Estes, citrus grower and packer

**Fast Track**

Before the establishment of New Varieties Development & Management Corp. (NVDMC), Florida released new citrus varieties infrequently — maybe every 10 to 20 years. "Due to disease pressure and increased competition, it became necessary to accelerate this process," says NVDMC Executive Director Peter Chaires.

NVDMC worked with Florida Foundation Seed Producers, Inc. and the University of Florida-IFAS to develop the Fast Track program. Fast Track allows citrus growers to plant promising experimental selections for trial and evaluation. Fast Track, currently for fresh growers only, is intended to speed the evaluation and commercialization of new varieties.

"We have now assisted in moving 16 IFAS selections into Fast Track trials, 10 USDA (U.S. Department of Agriculture) selections into trials, and commercialized four varieties," Chaires says. "NVDMC has varieties for evaluation and possibly commercialization from California, Italy, South Africa, Australia and Japan."

**THE INDUSTRY'S FUTURE**

"HLB is a challenge unlike anything that we have seen before," Chaires says. "We have seen presentations suggesting that the processed orange sector may have bottomed out and may be able to increase soon. Fresh production appears to have two or three more years of decline ahead as new plantings come online."

Chaires says growers are optimistic that some combination of tolerant rootstocks and scions, psyllid control and other tools will help them cope better with HLB. "Brilliant minds are at work on this issue. The next few years won't be easy or enjoyable, but as we weather the storm, better times are ahead."

He adds that while there have been substantial plantings of fresh varieties over the past three years, "The question will be: How many of these will be brought into production and maintained? The concern is that planting of some varieties has drastically slowed in 2014-15 due to difficulty with the 3- and 4-year-old trees already in the ground."

"Peter is an important part of our industry's future," says Cody Estes, chairman of Quality Fruit Packers and president of Estes Groves. "His understanding of the people and their personalities will help frame a successful future for our industry."