



UNIVERSITY OF  
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"Small Farmers, small farmers, where at thou?"

According to Florida Farm Bureau statistics from 2002, Indian River County has approximately 450 farms that cover over 190,000 acres. As a newcomer to this area, periodically I try to get out and drive around the county trying to learn more about it in terms of agricultural production. The larger farming operations are easy to spot from the road; bright shiny identifying signs, newer equipment in the field, recently graded dirt roads and miles of fruit trees or rangelands. These farms just look more prosperous and definitely more progressive. They usually have access to the latest technologies and their owners, and/or managers are considered first adapters of any new farming innovation. Quite often they are also considered to be leaders of their communities and are looked to as contributors in the decision-making process. Representatives of these larger farms and ranches usually have no problem seeking out sources of information and acquiring new resources that help their operation grow and prosper. Granted, in this day and age, and the way in which our county is growing towards a more urban make-up, farming is still a difficult way to make a living, even for the bigger operations. But what I am even more concerned about are the smaller farmers, the ones that don't have the clout that the larger farmers may have. I consider these farmers as the "invisible ones", the farmers with little voice in the decision-making process, and possibly more displaced than even the larger farmers in our changing county. These small farmers are "at risk" of being pushed out of a livelihood that they do because they love it, and definitely not because they make the big bucks.

Recently, I found myself driving around the area of Fellsmere and I realized where a large portion of the smaller farmers might be located. I saw goats, rabbits and chickens; I saw small holdings with tractors that had seen better days and buildings that needed more than just a new coat of paint. I am sure that this is not the only area in Indian River county where smaller farmers are located, I just happened to be out in that area when I was thinking about the small farmer in our county. One question to myself was, "are these farmers taking advantage of the

extension service and the educational programs that we can offer to them?" I would suspect not - since I don't know who you are I am sure that you probably don't know who I am, nor do you realize that part of my job is to assist you in your farming endeavors. As the agriculture agent for this county I am suppose to offer educational programming and outreach activities for all aspects of farming in our community. The problem is I just don't know what you need, no one speaks for the small farmer and so I have yet to learn what kind of educational opportunities that I can offer, or what kind of activities that you would be interested in.

The citrus industry in Indian River County is very well served by Jack Hebb, who is our multi-county citrus agent for UF/IFAS. He is a legend in these parts and his programs are so well known that he seldom needs assistance from us newer agriculture agents. Most, if not all of our citrus-related questions are turned directly over to him, unless they concern backyard citrus, and we have experienced Master Gardener volunteers for those questions. In order for me to build a strong and beneficial agriculture program, I need to see what other types of agriculture exist in our county. I need you to tell me - what is going on here. I need suggestions on what types of extension programming you might find useful, ideas about outreach activities that you would be willing to attend and most of all, a directory of who farms what, where they are doing it at, and if they need research-based educational assistance from UF/IFAS. Do you have 20-30 (or even more) laying hens and need some information about egg quality? Do you have some goats that you are milking or selling for meat? Are you interested in organic farming but need to learn more about the regulations? Do you need Worker Protection Standards training for you or your employees? Pesticide and/or farm safety? Do you need agriculture training in Spanish for your Hispanic workers? (¡Yo hablo español!) Do you just want to let me know what kind of agricultural operation you or your acquaintances may have? Well, just call me. I think we might just be looking for each other.

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