



UNIVERSITY OF  
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IFAS EXTENSION

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The next time that you are peeling a ripe, juicy orange and the rich, sugary juices are running down your fingers as you pop the cool, vitamin-laden segment into your mouth, you might want to thank the farmer that produced that orange just for you. I don't mean figuratively either, but really reach out to the person next to you, because he, or she, just might be the farmer that produced some of the fruits and vegetables that you are going to be enjoying today.

Amazing as it may be, Indian River County is home to more than 450 farms and ranches that encompasses a little over one half of the total size of the county, or about 169,000 acres. Although the majority of us would consider Indian River a mostly urbanized region, our county continues to have a strong agricultural presence in overall statewide statistics with the majority of production being in citrus, livestock, vegetable crops and ornamental plant nurseries.

Most of us living here, as well as the good portion of our visitors and seasonal residents, would never guess that there are over six million citrus trees (oranges and grapefruits) in our county that are valued at approximately \$30 million. We also have a beef cattle industry that averages about \$5 million a year in cash receipts. And if that were not enough, there is a multitude of vegetable and ornamental crops grown here that were valued at about \$50 million in 2002. Not bad for a county that is not normally known for its agricultural prowess even by its own residents. And maybe that is just the crux of the matter; residents and non-residents alike don't realize the scale at which Indian River is economically dependent upon agriculture for its livelihood.

As growth and development in our county is expanding, suitable acreage for production agriculture is disappearing. With the spread of urbanization throughout our county, it is a wonder that there is any farming left in Indian River, let alone in and around the larger towns like Vero Beach and Sebastian. The reasons for the decline of agriculture in this area are not always as clear-cut as one might think. Yes, development and demand has increased the value of land so much that, in certain areas, farming is no longer practical in the face of what one can get for an acre of land that is zoned for development. It would be extremely difficult for anyone to hold out against the pressure of knowing that the land is more valuable for a housing development than for agricultural production.

Few people go into farming to make lots of money and many farmers barely make ends meet. Although many of them view farming not just as a profession but rather a lifestyle, seldom does the average farmer have the luxury of turning down an offer on his land that might be more money than he would ever make farming that same acre. Some farmers have done just that though, and continue to farm as housing developments and strip malls crop up around them. This would not necessarily be a negative situation if everyone could adopt the "good neighbor" policy and try to understand and accept each other's role in the community.

Unfortunately, usually due to a lack of awareness or misunderstanding, the new home and business owners begin to be concerned about the different farming activities that they might be observing. Sometimes instead of asking the farmer directly what he or she is doing, they complain to county officials, call the police or begin to pass ordinances that further inhibit the farmer from doing his job, which is, after all, to feed us. Granted, there are times when citizens do need to be concerned about a particular farming activity that might be taking place near their home. But one thing they also need to realize is that farmers are one of the most highly regulated groups by federal, state and local governments, and it would be difficult to impossible for them to stay in business if they were not following all of the restrictions, regulations and ordinances that have been put in place for our protection.

It is interesting to hear builders, developers and planners alike, talk about the revolution of "New Urbanism" where they are trying to promote the small town atmosphere in their developments within urbanized regions so that the residents can feel friendlier and more at home with each other. It is evident that there is an element missing from this plan and that is of the farming community, which usually is the backbone of a small town. The farming community in Indian River County supplies the food that we eat, jobs and livelihoods for many of our residents, as well as the feeling of living in a tightly knit community. For our own wellbeing, and for that of our community, they should be considered, and included, in the future planning of our county.

It's a lot to think about while you're eating that orange.

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