

## **Exploring Agriculture in Alachua County**

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Did you know that agriculture provides \$255.4 million value added impact and is the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest employer in Alachua County? We are also 2<sup>nd</sup> in the state in production of snap beans, forage crops, and meat goats.

On May 10th, 52 individuals got an opportunity to get up close and personal with some of our local agricultural and horticultural producers, as well as hear about some groundbreaking projects, during our Ag Tour. The extension agents were in full force as we educated the participants between stops and throughout the tour.

Our first stop was Hodge Farms, a fourth generation family farm. The Hodges began farming in the Newberry area in 1919. They have approximately 1,500 acres in production growing watermelons, blueberries, tobacco, cattle, bahiagrass seed and browntop millet seed. In addition, each fall the Hodges grow and operate the Newberry Corn Field Maze.

The farm participates in the County Alliance for Responsible Environmental Stewardship (CARES) program and follows Best Management Practices (BMP) for row crop and cow/calf production.

Our second stop was Big Trees Plantation, a wholesale plant nursery located in Newberry. The nursery started back in the mid 1980's by Mr. Miguel Diaz, as a supplier for Dibros Corporation which is Town of Tioga's development company. Since then, the nursery has developed into a large wholesale plant supplier and a highly qualified irrigation contractor company. Their specialty is finished landscape material that includes large specimen trees and shrubs.

About 35 different trees and shrubs are available in this nursery including oaks, maples, magnolias, elms, pines, crape myrtles, green ash, ligustrums, river birch and more.

Big Trees Plantation's general manager, Mr. Ed Bravo, actively participates in a variety of programs and practices are aimed to conserve water and reduce the use of chemicals. The nursery is a member of the CARES program and has been acknowledged with a Suwannee River Water Management Best Management Practices accreditation.

Big Trees Plantation is very involved with the statewide organization, Florida Nursery, Growers and Landscape Association (FNGLA). The nursery follows best management practices according to FNGLA's guidelines and adopts Florida Friendly principles for all of its clientele's landscaping projects.

Our third stop was Jonesville Park, a local sports complex and recreational area that is adding a more homegrown element. Alachua County is excited to support edible, perennial landscapes throughout our County parks system. This project will be the first of several. The second will be at Chestnut Park in 2018. This is a project near and dear to my heart since we have been planning it for a couple of years now.

This teaching garden will provide educational opportunities for people of all ages, allowing them to connect with each other, re-connect with nature, and disconnect from technology. The edible orchard will feature a muscadine grape vineyard, blueberries and blackberries, citrus trees, nut trees, persimmons, pears, and many more. The first fruits to be planted will be the grapes with the other trees planted in the winter.

This area will also feature a large pollinator garden that will attract bees to pollinate the fruit, as well as butterflies and other pollinators. During the tour, Gary VanCleaf, the Apiary Inspector for the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Sciences spoke to the group about the importance of bees and some of the misconceptions surrounding colony collapse disorder. He also encouraged homeowners to put in their own pollinator garden to preserve the local pollinators.

Our last stop was Norfleet Cattle Company, a family run cattle operation located in Newberry. Mr. Ed Norfleet, and his sons, Trip and Paul, have been in the cattle and farming business all their life.

The operation is a cow/calf operation raising crossbred cattle. The Norfleet's also buy stocker cattle to background and sell. Their most recent venture involves the feeding, harvesting, and marketing of their local beef in Florida. The most difficult part of having local beef in the grocery stores is a lack of a close processing plant and Publix is trying to bridge that gap.

I try to support local agriculture by shopping at farmer's markets and paying special attention to "produced locally" signs in the grocery stores. Hopefully you will too. It's amazing to know how much goes into making food.