by PHILLIP RUCKS

CITRUS GROWERS NEED TO WEIGH OPTIONS

Citrus groves are becoming living laboratories, according to Dr. Jude Grosser, a University of Florida (UF) professor at Citrus Research and Education Center in Lake Alfred. That's because we know of no varieties that are immune to citrus greening disease, or greening resistant. What we do have are varieties that are more greening tolerant. In other words, they are more likely to produce a saleable crop for more years than the less tolerant varieties.

As an industry we're still looking for the ultimate variety and rootstock—as well as more varieties with more tolerance—to survive. UF researchers have identified 16 rootstock varieties that are more tolerant to greening, or Huanglongbing (HLB), but it may take a couple more years before they are available in large quantities to growers.

In the meantime, the groves are labs. Here's what we know. Dr. Grosser and his UF colleagues, including Dr. Fred Gmitter, a horticulture professor, and Dr. Bill Castle, a horticulture professor emeritus, have led the effort to develop rootstocks.

Dr. Grosser says the C4-16-12, a sweet orange-like hybrid, containing 8% trifoliate orange, which is truly resistant to HLB, is one of the most promising greening-tolerant round oranges; Also the following rootstocks of UFR 3, 15, 16 and 17 appear to have a lower frequency of greening as they are more tolerant than traditional rootstocks.

According to Dr. Jose Chaparro, a UF professor focusing on tangerine types, there's better news for fresh tangerine-type growers than for those growing oranges to juice. Citrus varieties that are more greening tolerant include Nova, Fallglo, Jackson Grapefruit, and Triumph Grapefruit.

While the research is showing promise, it will take time to access greening tolerance. In the meantime, the number one rootstock still is Swingle, Dr. Castle says. For 2013, the number two rootstock was the Sour Orange, which is cold hardy but susceptible to the tristeza virus, is less of a factor today with the increase pesticide application frequency in controlling the psyllid that affects the aphid population as well.

The newly and future developed HLB tolerant rootstocks will take too much time for seed tree establishment, thus resulting in cutting and tissue culture stock accelerating the needs. Remember to be cautious in spreading your risk in considering more rootstock options to avoid being one dimensional.

Growers also need to consider their choice of rootstocks for the following factors – tree planting density, cold susceptibility, soil type, variety compatibility and whether it's a fresh or juice market, but it is always a difficult decision considering all these factors. At Phillip Rucks Citrus Nursery, we are forced to bud trees on cuttings due to the limited rootstock seed availability. Cuttings, if grown right, are superior to seedlings due to its origin being from DNA tested and true to type mother stock having no variability like the traditional seed source.