



COMMISSIONER'S
Ag·ENVIRONMENTAL
LEADERSHIP AWARDS
2023





Dear Friends,

It is my great pleasure to recognize the recipients of the 2023 Commissioner's Agricultural Environmental Leadership Award: Rocking K Cattle Company, Brite Leaf Citrus Nursery, and Island Grove Wine Company. While these operations are vastly different, they share a common goal of maximizing efficiency, reducing water use, and protecting Florida lands through environmentally innovative practices.

Since 1994, the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services has recognized agricultural enterprises that demonstrate leadership in developing and implementing innovative techniques to safeguard the environment and conserve natural resources. It is an honor to highlight the efforts and accomplishments of these environmental stewards who serve as outstanding examples of agricultural guardianship. With their help, we can preserve and maintain Florida's abundant natural resources.

Sincerely,

Wilton Simpson

Commissioner of Agriculture



ROCKING K CATTLE COMPANY

Odessa

One of the underappreciated aspects of Florida agriculture is its preservation of greenspace. For Rocking K Cattle Company of Odessa, Florida, a partnership with Hillsborough County allows its cattle to graze open pasture while protecting environmentally sensitive lands as well as wildlife habitats and corridors for the public to enjoy.



Rocking K Cattle Company stands out for its sustainable cattle ranching and hay production. This cow/calf operation of 800 head of Brangus and Braford Cattle is owned and operated by Kelly Fulford (right).



Much of this conservation area is open to the public who enjoy daytime hiking or horseback riding in the greenspace.



Rocking K operates on preserved lands as part of Hillsborough County's Jan K. Platt Environmental Lands Acquisition and Protection Program (ELAPP). Under the lease agreement Rocking K's cattle can graze 1600 acres of the Lake Francis Nature Preserve. In return, the company manages the property, including maintaining fences and gates, monitoring for invasive exotic and non-native plants, and ensuring the protection of any species listed as endangered, threatened or of special concern by Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation (FWC).

Rocking K implements several Best Management Practices (BMPs) to safeguard water quality and local wildlife. Rotational grazing is conducted across seven cross-fenced pastures. The cattle are rotated on a weekly to biweekly basis to different pastures which provides fresh forage to the cattle while allowing the land to recuperate.



Creep Feeders, hay, and mineral boxes are placed 100 ft. or more away from wetlands, lakes, and drainage canals and are routinely rotated to keep the cattle from loafing in one area for extended periods of time. This practice helps prevent soil erosion and stripping of the vegetation. Water troughs are placed in pastures where the cattle do not have access to fresh water.



The cattle graze on predominantly native grasses. Soil testing is done to determine what fertilizer is needed, which is then applied using GPS-guided systems.





Kelly works diligently to preserve the water quality of cypress ponds and natural ditches on the property.



Owner, Kelly Fulford



Cattleman Lint Jerrels (right) moves the herd with daughter Claire (left) and son Lash (center).

A large, arched greenhouse with a metal frame and translucent panels. Inside, rows of mature citrus trees with dense green foliage are planted in a sandy area. The perspective is from a low angle, looking down a central aisle between the trees towards the far end of the structure.

BRITE LEAF CITRUS NURSERY

Lake Panasoffkee

For over 100 years, outdoor nurseries were a dependable source of trees for Florida's citrus groves. But faced with the ongoing battles with canker and greening, the citrus nursery industry knew it had to adapt to survive. Nursery owners Nate and Anna Jameson responded by relocating outside the industry and expanding their small greenhouse operation in order to provide more clean, disease-free trees to growers.



The family's old cane grinding mill, set in 1918, serves as a time stamp.

Brite Leaf Citrus Nursery, located near Lake Panasoffkee, sits on property that has been in Anna's family for over a century. In days gone by, cattle and watermelons were the primary crop. Today, the nursery maintains the family's agricultural tradition by growing a wide variety of citrus trees for commercial, retail and wholesale buyers as well as trees for research projects with University of Florida and USDA.



Owners, Nate and Anna Jameson



Michelle Cartaya (left) and Nate examines the leaves of a citrus plant.



The entire operation, spread across two facilities, is comprised of almost 241,000 square feet of fully enclosed, insect-proof greenhouses. To stay disease-free, the nursery employs a multi-layered approach including a double entrance, sanitation of personnel and equipment, and regular testing of plant material. For the past 13 years, the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS) and USDA have tested Brite Leaf biannually for Huanglongbing (HLB) and all 27 samplings have tested negative, proving the effectiveness of the systems currently in place.



The original source of Brite Leaf's budwood is FDACS' Division of Plant Industry. Based in Chiefland, Florida, the Chiefland Budwood Foundation propagates and distributes 100% disease-free source plant material for nurseries. From this budwood, Brite Leaf produces Scion trees and/or Increase Blocks for the purpose of growing more trees for the industry.

Brite Leaf also works with the Florida Department of Citrus' Program for Expedited Propagation (PEP), which is dedicated to quickly producing trees from the recently rescued Donaldson tree as well as a few others.



The transition from overhead to drip irrigation has been one of the nursery's most effective BMPs. By switching irrigation methods, Brite Leaf reduced its water use by 60 percent, from 24,000 gallons per day to less than 10,000 gallons per day. This change also allowed for converting from controlled release fertilizer to liquid fertilizer which can be applied more precisely.



Each of the greenhouses has computer-controlled environmental and irrigation systems. Connected to the internet, Nathan Jameson (above right) can manage many aspects of the nursery from irrigation to heating using a computer, tablet, or smart phone.



Automation is one tool to help control the rising cost of producing trees. Combining the Ellepot machine with additional automation has significantly reduced the amount of labor needed to plant seedlings.

The Ellepot utilizes bio-degradable paper rather than a plastic pot. This, along with the coconut fiber, a sanitary option for substrate, comes together to form a growing system that reduces the need for disposable plastic containers going to the field.



Coconut fiber, a natural byproduct of the coconut industry, combines well with the nursery's liquid fertigation system and allows for better root growth.



In 2001, on a whim, Anna tried moving some overstocked Key Limes on eBay. A quick turn-around eventually led the company to develop its successful direct-to-customer online sales.



Today, Brite Leaf sells over 250,000 citrus plants per year to growers, garden centers, and online shoppers. The nursery supplies the same high quality, disease-free plants to both groves and homeowners regardless of whether the order is for 10,000 plants or a single tree. Above, Maria Romero prepares an order for shipment.



The Jameson family prioritizes land sustainability. Outside of the greenhouses, pine trees that are planted as windbreaks also provide natural habitats for local wildlife.



Nathan Jameson, Anna Jameson, Nate Jameson



The Brite Leaf Team / Family



ISLAND GROVE WINE COMPANY

Hawthorne

They say when life gives you lemons, make lemonade. But what if life gives you an overabundance of blueberries? For one north Florida operation, the answer was deliciously simple.

Island Grove Wine Company has its roots in the blueberry fields of north central Florida. In 1995, berry farmer Ken Patterson and another grower merged farms to form Island Grove Ag Products (IGAP).



In 2009, looking for a way to make use of the left-over crop, Ken met with Chase Marden, a veteran fruit winemaker, and founded Island Grove Wine Company. The operation's use of the berries in a value-added product meant the entire harvest could be used with zero waste.



Over the years, IGAP thrived. A partnership with the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences breeding program helped increase production and introduced new blueberry varieties to the fields. But for Ken, the farm's success came with a price; thousands of pounds of fruit, either culled out at the packing house or left on the bush at the end of the growing season, were going to waste.

Ken retired in 2020, leaving the farm in the hands of his nephew-in-law, Jerod Gross (right). An advocate of environmentally friendly and sustainable farming, Jerod manages approximately 200 acres of certified organic berry production in Island Grove's Alachua / Putnam County farm locations and 100 acres of conventional berry production in Desoto County.





Island Grove has been enrolled in the Best Management Practices (BMP) program since 2011. The fields utilize drip irrigation to maximize efficiency and drain tile systems to minimize runoff. Grass buffers provide for nutrient filtration.



Cups located throughout the fields are part of the farm’s Integrated Pest Management (IPM). They are used to monitor for the spotted wing drosophila (SWD), an invasive fruit fly that feasts on unripened fruit. Originally from southeast Asia, SWD is a serious threat to the blueberry crop.



Wildflower areas around the property support native pollinators.



Island Grove's Winery Team (left to right):
Jerod Gross, Sarah Aschliman, Chase Marden



Blueberries are the foundation of the Island Grove Wine Company's product line. Each of the four 5,000-gallon tanks can generate 25,000 bottles at a time. Nine other 1,000-gallon tanks are reserved for still and sparkling wine.

Island Grove currently produces 14 blends of wine and four sparkling varieties.



Ken's daughter, Sarah Aschliman, created the branding and design for the winery. In 2012 she left her career as a Creative Director in the toy industry and joined the family business. Today she is the VP of Marketing for the winery and handles all the marketing, design and brand building.



Sarah Aschliman created the original artwork on the label incorporating fruit into the skulls.



Jerod Gross is the General Manager of Island Grove Ag Products.

PREVIOUS WINNERS

2022	Lee Peanut Farms – <i>Lee</i> The Groves of Peace River – <i>Zolfo Springs</i> Usher Land and Timber – <i>Chiefland</i>	2007	Butler Oaks Farm – <i>Lorida</i> Gwinn Brothers Farm – <i>McAlpin</i> Buck Island Ranch – <i>Lake Placid</i> Fraleigh Nursery – <i>Madison</i>
2021	The Jungle Nursery – <i>Homestead</i> Tater Farms – <i>Hastings</i> Brad Turner – <i>Lithia</i>	2006	Tampa Wholesale Nursery – <i>Dover</i> Riverview Flower Farm – <i>Riverview</i> Lightsey Cattle Company – <i>Lake Wales</i>
2019	Marshall Farms – <i>Baker</i> Blue Sky Farms – <i>Elkton</i> EIP Citrus Managment – <i>Polk</i>	2005	Kerry’s Bromeliad Nursery – <i>Homestead</i> Larson Dairy – <i>Okeechobee</i> Richard N. Raid, Ph.D. – <i>Royal Palm Beach</i>
2018	Tree-O-Groves – <i>Lake Alfred</i> Wild Goose Farms – <i>Umatilla</i> Blackbeards Ranch – <i>Myakka City</i>	2004	Blue Heron Groves – <i>Lakeland</i> M&B Products – <i>Tampa</i> McArthur Farms – <i>Port St. Lucie</i>
2017	Florida Blue Farms – <i>Waldo</i> Speedling – <i>Ruskin</i> Cindale Farms – <i>Marianna</i>	2003	Williamson Cattle Company – <i>Okeechobee</i> Sun City Tree Farm – <i>Ruskin</i> Aquatica Tropicals – <i>Plant City</i>
2016	Jones Potato Farm – <i>Manatee and Hendry</i> Cherrylake – <i>Groveland</i> Alliance Dairies – <i>Trenton</i>	2002	Holloway Irrigation Systems – <i>Leesburg</i> Daniel A. Botts – <i>Orlando</i> Sanwa Growers – <i>Wimauma</i>
2015	Carlton and Carlton Ranch – <i>Hillsborough</i> Dasher Farm – <i>McAlpin</i> Bull Hammock Ranch – <i>Fort Pierce</i>	2001	Carlton 2x4 Ranch – <i>Arcadia</i> Barthle Brothers Ranch – <i>San Antonio</i>
2014	Agri-Starts, Inc. – <i>Apopka</i> Riverdale Potato Farm, Inc. – <i>Elkton</i> Milking R, Inc. – <i>Okeechobee</i>	2000	Pacific Tomato Growers – <i>Palmetto</i> Evans Properties – <i>Vero Beach</i>
2013	Kissimmee Park Properties, LLC – <i>St. Cloud</i> Ferris Farms – <i>Floral City</i> Farnton Tree Farm – <i>Osteen</i>	1999	Two Rivers Ranch – <i>Thonotosassa</i> Lykes Bros. – <i>Okeechobee</i> Suwannee Farms – <i>O’Brien</i>
2012	Deroose Plants, Inc. – <i>Apopka</i> Southern Accent Farm – <i>Okeechobee</i>	1998	Longino Ranch – <i>Arcadia</i> V&W Farms – <i>Avon Park</i>
2011	Straughn Farms, LLC – <i>Waldo</i>	1997	Anclote River Ranch – <i>Odessa</i>
2010	Saturiwa Conservation Area – <i>Elkton</i> 3 Boys Farm – <i>Ruskin</i> Arapaho Citrus Management – <i>Fort Pierce</i>	1996	Edward “Jack” Campbell – <i>Homestead</i> Citrus World – <i>Lake Wales</i> Ekkwill Waterlife Resources – <i>Gibson</i>
2009	Dairy Production Systems – <i>High Springs</i> Loop’s Nursery – <i>Jacksonville</i>	1995	Schroeder Manatee Ranch – <i>Bradenton</i> Burt McKee – <i>Tampa</i> Davie Dairy – <i>Okeechobee</i> O.F. Nelson and Sons Nursery – <i>Apopka</i> Bright Hour Ranch – <i>Arcadia</i> Deseret Ranches of Florida – <i>St. Cloud</i> Fulford Farms – <i>Monticello</i>
2008	Carroll Brothers Nursery – <i>Clearwater</i> Brock Family Farm – <i>Monticello</i>		



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