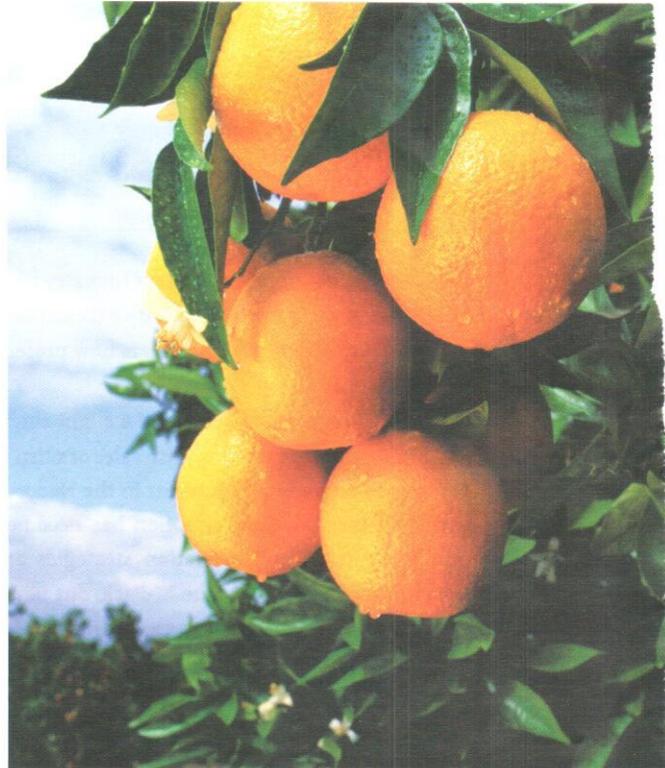


# Florida's citrus headache

One of the world's most fertile regions for citrus growing is under threat from a persistent pest, writes Martyn Fisher



**T**he orange is so synonymous with Florida, an image of the product adorns the registration plates of motor vehicles across the state, and you'll also find both Orange County and Citrus County in the US's self-proclaimed 'Sunshine State'.

But at present, sourness permeates the state's \$9 billion citrus industry. Farmers face a major threat from a crop-destroying disease that is causing them to burn down their orange trees in a desperate attempt to stop its spread.

Asian citrus psyllid, the minute invasive insect causing the commotion, carries a bacterium that infects the fruits, and also feeds on citrus tree leaves. Ellis Hunt Jr, whose family owns more than 5,000 acres of orange groves and supplies the Florida's Natural orange juice brand, tells Associated Press that he's currently spending approximately \$2,000 per acre - 100 per cent more than he was splashing out 10 years ago. Most of the production costs, he says, go into treating and controlling the psyllid's spread: "It feels like you're in a war - we can't let this thing go down on our watch," he warns.

Infected orange trees continue to produce fruit, but only until the disease laces its way through the tree's vascular system. Then, the fruit falls and the tree slowly begins to die. There is no known cure, as yet.

The bug is believed to have originated from China, but first arrived in southern California from Mexico in 2008, due to the spread of disease throughout Mexico from China. There is a belief locally that the psyllid insect and the disease was already living in back-garden Floridian citrus trees for



- 1— Florida is a citrus-growing heartland
- 2— Citrus even adorns Florida licence plates

several years, but it appears that the Asian citrus psyllid brought the disease into commercial citrus orchards, and so set in motion the current crisis.

While Florida citrus farmers have been using broad-spectrum pesticides eight times a year to reduce the spread of the bugs and disease, an adult psyllid can transmit the disease faster than most pesticides can kill it, according to the University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources.

Florida State agriculture commissioner Adam Putnam told Associated Press: "This affects the whole state - the economic impact, the landscape, the iconic image of Florida and how it has drawn people here to smell the orange blossoms in the spring and look forward to that Christmas gift of fresh Florida citrus.

"It will have a ripple effect throughout the economy if we can't get our arms around this disease."

A cure for the spread of disease is not in sight, putting jobs at risk in an industry that is estimated to employ around 75,000 people. And, as if that was not unnerving enough, it is happening at a time when sales of Florida orange juice have plummeted to a 12-year low. **FPI**

## South Africans continue fight over EU import rules

Citrus growers in South Africa - the world's biggest orange exporter - have asked their government to set up an independent panel to help resolve its dispute with the EU over the region's strict import requirements.

They are hoping that the panel will consider the merits of a recent report that claimed that citrus black spot disease, a fungus that causes fruit blemishes and has been known to affect South African produce, can't be established or spread to EU fruits.

The report, compiled by an expert panel of professionals in the plant health field from South Africa, USA, Brazil, Argentina and Australia, found that the fungal disease had a wide global distribution, but was only known to occur in summer rainfall citrus production areas, and not in areas with a Mediterranean climate.

Citrus from South Africa, which represents about a third of all the EU's imports, has been subject to more stringent checks to prevent the spread of the disease to member states since earlier this year. **FPI**



Photo: amy the nurse