

Industry is back in bloom

Nursery sales top \$3 billion, UF survey says.

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Florida's nursery and greenhouse foliage industry grossed more than \$3 billion in sales last year -- and more than \$15 billion when landscape services and retail sales are included, a University of Florida survey reported Thursday.

The survey ranked Orange County among the top five counties in the state, with \$374 million in nursery sales and \$1.1 billion overall.

Despite being hammered by hurricanes in 2004 and 2005, the industry is showing healthy expansion in every category, said university researcher Alan Hodges, who presented the findings at the opening of the Florida Nursery and Allied Trades show in the Orange County Convention Center.

"I'm impressed with the continued strong growth," said Hodges, an associate professor with UF's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences in Gainesville.

When UF conducted a survey five years ago, it estimated Florida's foliage-production sales at \$2.5 billion, and \$11.1 billion overall with landscaping and retail sales figured in.

The industry's average annual sales growth since 1997 has been a brisk 7.8 percent, the survey found, though the rate has slowed slightly during the past five years.

"The industry may be maturing, with sales leveling off," Hodges said. Still, foliage's total economic effect makes it the largest segment of Florida's agriculture industry, and it is "now by far the largest employer in agriculture," Hodges said, with more than 25,000 full-time and nearly 9,000 part-time workers in nursery production.

State Agriculture Commissioner Charles Bronson, who toured damaged foliage greenhouses hit hard by tropical storms in 2004 and 2005, said he also was surprised by the industry's resilience.

"I'm not sure even I thought it could rebound this fast," said Bronson, who on Thursday toured the trade show, sponsored by the Orlando-based Florida Nursery Growers and Landscape Association.

Foliage growers at the event said they were gratified to see the industry contributing significantly to Florida's economy, especially since sectors such as citrus are losing acreage to urban growth and diseases such as canker.

Michel Sallin, president and chief executive officer of Cherry Lake Tree Farm, in Lake County, said his family's citrus business in Indian River County is suffering along with the rest.

"We have no good answers, no good solutions, to problems such as canker and greening, which is said to be even worse than canker," Sallin said. Meanwhile, his Lake County nursery farm is expanding, performing well and benefiting from the state's development growth. Part of the family's 1,083 acres near Groveland is expected to be developed with single-family homes, but at the same time the company is preparing for satellite nursery operations elsewhere that will double its foliage production by 2011.

Monty Knox, whose family-owned Knox Nursery is consolidating its Orange County foliage operations at a site near Winter Garden, said he expects to increase production and efficiency by moving from the family's older greenhouses in Pine Hills to a more modern plant.

"We expect sales to go up," even with less square footage, Knox said. The business also expects to reduce its effect on the environment by cutting the amount of water, fertilizer and chemicals it uses. The older nursery, which the family has operated since the 1960s, will be sold and most likely developed because of urban growth in the region, Knox said.

Ben Bolusky, executive vice president of the statewide nursery association, said the economic benefits to Florida from the foliage industry are huge -- but do not come from big businesses. "These are overwhelmingly small, family farms," such as those operated by the Knox and Sallin families, he said.

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