

ANOTHER JUICY FRUIT HAS BEGUN TO GROW

in Florida groves. Long known as a product of California and Georgia farms, the peach may have a future in the Sunshine State.

Lake Wales farmer Greg Waters certainly thinks so. In the spring of 2010 he planted 25 of his 40 acres with two varieties of peaches that were specifically developed by the University of Florida for sub-tropical climates. The varieties are referred to as low-chill, since the trees need less time under 45° F than do peaches grown in states to the north.

“The peach thing has become very big down here,” says Waters, who then corrects himself, saying, “or it will be big.”

Waters is new to peaches and his trees are still a few years away from maturity—surprising even to him, they produced fruit the first year—he grew up working in his family’s citrus orchard near Frostproof, just 15 minutes away from his current farm. Since graduating college with a business degree, he’s worked as a controller for a sizable landscaping and irrigation company, and has pursued his passion for flying helicopters.

To help pay for what he refers to as an “expensive hobby,” he’s provided rides to paying passengers from a dude ranch and flown frost patrol, which entails buzzing low and slow over citrus orchards in the winter to keep the fruit from freezing. He still does the latter, but says, “It’s hard. It’s dangerous. It’s dark. It’s not fun.”

Until mid-2010 he also flew for Progress Energy-Florida, a large utility company, piloting his helicopter

as company personnel inspected power lines and the the rights-of-way that surround them. “I did that for 6½ years and was flying a lot. But I got to talking to my wife one night, and I said, ‘You know, there’s no security in these contracts, because we’re dealing with huge companies. We better do something to subsidize our income in case something happens.’”

The fallback was planting peaches on property the Waters family had previously purchased. It was fortuitous. The contract did eventually get canceled, and even though Waters’ helicopter company is still his main source of income, the orchard has now taken on a greater role.

Waters explains that, even with a lifetime of knowledge about citrus, he felt safe going with the relatively unproven peaches. He quickly discovered that peach trees need a lot of TLC. Because they grow so fast, he has to prune them back twice a year. “What was to be a side thing, has become an animal,” he says. “I mean, it’s a lot of work. Fortunately, I’m able to do 90% of it myself, because I have the background.”

Like something of a helicopter parent, Waters hovers over his peaches. “I take very good care of these trees, noting that at \$3,500 per acre in Florida, they’re more expensive to grow than the \$1,500 for an acre of citrus. Yet, the latter price has more than doubled in the last several years due to the need for additional spraying to control pests, and it could go even higher.

“The citrus industry down here has been taking hits,” he says, mentioning several diseases affecting

