My experience with the State/County Experience, Chapter 1

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The State/County Experience is a program designed to introduce new state extension specialists with a 30% or more extension appointment to their role in the Florida Extension system. Main objectives for both state and county faculty are:

- Appreciate the importance of building and maintaining positive relationships among state and county faculty.
- Develop an understanding of how programs are created, developed, and funded at the state/county level.
- Understand the state and county level evaluation and accountability process.
- Develop educational materials that address information needs of clientele in the area of specialization of participating faculty.

I was paired with two experienced county faculty with responsibilities in vegetable crops: Teresa Olczyk from Homestead in Miami-Dade County Cooperative Extension and Ed Skvarch from Ft. Pierce (St. Lucie County Cooperative Extension). During the one and a half days I spent at each location, I was introduced to colleagues, toured research facilities including the Indian River REC bio-control lab and USDA ARS lab in Ft. Pierce, and most interesting of all, we visited with proprietors of small diversified farms. During car rides to and from locations, I had an opportunity to talk with Ed and Teresa about life on the front lines. We talked about the responsibilities and opportunities associated with our jobs, the day to day routines, and our families. I discovered that they are never in their offices, their phones ring regularly, and they both wish they could be in two places at once to do everything they want to do. Sounds just like Gainesville!

Ed and Teresa made sure I got to visit five really fantastic organic farms including three farms near Lake Okeechobee and two near Homestead. All the farms were less than 15 acres, and all sold their produce locally. One grower operates a 175 member CSA.
(Community Supported Agriculture). She has two drop-off locations a week, and harvests about 30 weeks a year. Another family sells at area markets and although they are only in their 3rd season of production, have regular customers and are seeking to expand. Three other growers sell to high-end restaurants and work closely with their clientele chefs to provide a wide variety of high quality, visually appealing vegetables and fruits. Some of the crops in production were micro greens, over 30 varieties of tomatoes, edible flowers including nasturtiums and borage, crucifers including many Asian varieties of all colors and flavors, beans, and raspberries and strawberries. Of course, we tasted everything! I have included a few photos with permission for your enjoyment.
(Bee Haven farm packing house and shed with solar powered hot water heater and freezer)

(Varrigreen Farm Open House, Okeechobee, FL)
Ed, Teresa and I are currently working on developing informational tools for small farmers in south Florida. Although these ideas were generated from visits to organic farms, we believe these tools will have applications across production systems. I will be returning to south Florida soon to continue the work, and an update on these materials will be forthcoming.