The Florida Ag Expo: A Recipe For Success

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The UF/IFAS Gulf Coast Research and Education Center (GCREC) in Balm, Florida recently hosted its fourth annual Florida Ag Expo in partnership with Meister Media Publishing. Balm is located in south eastern Hillsborough County, FL and is a central location for many of the area’s surrounding agricultural operations. The area produces a variety of agricultural commodities, but two of the largest are strawberry and tomato crops with approximately 8,300 acres of strawberries in Hillsborough County and over 12,000 acres of tomatoes in Manatee County, although when it comes to production, county lines don’t get in the way. It only seems natural to have a meeting of growers and other industry leaders in this agricultural hot spot.

The Florida Ag Expo started as an idea from long-time tomato growers Tony Di Mare and Jay Taylor. After attending an agricultural event in Culiacan, Mexico the growers decided that they would like to see a similar event in Florida, since one did not yet exist. The idea was presented to the GCREC Director, Jack Rechcigl, and then UF’s senior vice president, Jimmy Cheek. Five years later, on Oct 28, 2009, the fourth Florida Ag Expo was carried out and many say that it was the most successful yet. It was presented by UF/IFAS, The Florida Strawberry Growers Association, The Florida Fruit & Vegetable Association, and The Florida Tomato Committee. The Florida Ag Expo is one of a kind. It is a true partnership between UF/IFAS researchers, extension agents, growers, and industry representatives. It’s not your typical trade show or conference. It is unique in that it ties in multiple activities for all audiences including educational sessions, field tours and vendor booths.
The educational sessions are presented by UF/IFAS researchers from around the state as well as growers and industry representatives. The sessions provide up-to-date research and information that will help growers become more competitive in a global economy. This year’s topics ranged from methyl bromide alternatives to opportunities to grow blueberries, blackberries, and peaches in Florida. Educational sessions are grouped by topics so that participants can attend sessions that are of interest to them. This year’s expo included a new session discussing sustainable water use practices in agricultural production. Sessions were moderated by UF/IFAS Vegetable Extension Agents, including Gene McAvoy, Alicia Whidden, and Crystal Snodgrass, as well as Hillsborough County’s Manager of Agriculture Industry Development, Stephen Gran. The agents also provided CEU’s, continuing education units, to pesticide license holders and Certified Crop Advisors for attending each session.

Not only do growers get to hear about current research, they also have an opportunity to see it firsthand. Two field tours were held where participants made stops at selected research sites. The GCREC showcased trials on methyl bromide alternatives, insect and disease management, tomato variety trials, and strawberries and melons grown under high tunnels, a practice that is widely adopted worldwide and has potential for increasing production in Florida.

When not attending sessions or field tours, attendees visited vendor booths where they could see and hear about the latest products available for agricultural production. Non-profit groups like the USDA and the UF/IFAS Small Farms group also set-up booth to interact with participants.

Although the Florida Ag Expo is one action-packed day, it is exciting and informational. It provides growers, researchers, extension agents and vendors opportunities to interact with one another and gather information that may benefit their organization. Before the first Florida Ag Expo took place Tony DiMare said, “I would hope the attendees will find our inaugural event both informative and educational. If the event is successful for all those who have a vested interest, we hope to expand the expo in the future.” This year’s expo boasted 950 attendees; a jump from last year’s 750. This is a tremendous increase from the first Florida Ag Expo when about 400 people attended. The number of vendor booths also increased from 40 in 2008 to 50 in 2009. Tony’s hope has been realized as the Florida Ag Expo becomes one of the most popular agricultural events in Florida. This year the expo went national. Growers from North Carolina, and Washington traveled long distances to attend this unique event. Pictures and presentations from this year’s expo will soon be available at [http://gcrec.ifas.ufl.edu/](http://gcrec.ifas.ufl.edu/). Planning for next year’s Florida Ag Expo has already begun and will be here before you know it. Be sure to attend.
Dr. Joe Funderburk teaches the audience about Western Flower Thrips Management. (Photo by Jack Rechcigl)

Vendors interact with participants (Photo by Jack Rechcigl)