

## Virtual Ag Tour; Raising Agriculture Awareness

Wael Elwakil Extension Agent II, Commercial Horticulture ([wael.elwakil@ufl.edu](mailto:wael.elwakil@ufl.edu))

Angela Collins Extension Agent II - Multi County, Sea Grant ([abcollins@ufl.edu](mailto:abcollins@ufl.edu))

Christa Kirby, Extension Agent III, Livestock ([ccarlson@ufl.edu](mailto:ccarlson@ufl.edu))

Lisa Hickey, Extension Agent II, Sustainable Ag & Food Systems ([lisa.hickey@ufl.edu](mailto:lisa.hickey@ufl.edu))

Crystal Snodgrass, CED & Extension Agent III, Agriculture ([crys21@ufl.edu](mailto:crys21@ufl.edu))

### Abstract

In an ever-changing world, agriculturalists adapt to meet the needs of communities and provide some of the planet's most essential services. UF/IFAS Extension and Florida Sea Grant joined forces to highlight the local agriculture production of Manatee County which is among the highest in the state of Florida with over 192,630 acres in agriculture production. Commercial ornamental horticulture production is valued at over \$41 million, while livestock production is valued at over \$36 million, and wild seafood landings with over 10 million pounds annually valued at over \$11 million, in addition to aquaculture production. This three-part docuseries objective was to promote local Florida agriculture during Manatee County's first-ever Virtual Ag Tour to raise public ag awareness featuring six different agriculture producers with unique production styles. In this documentary, we learned about production practices, best management practices, and integrated pest management, environmental conservation efforts, as well as the challenges and COVID-19 pandemic impacts on these businesses. [Docuseries part 1](#) highlighted two ornamental horticulture growers. [Docuseries part 2](#) focused on two of the largest conservation ranches and their very diverse production systems. [Docuseries part 3](#) featured local working waterfronts and focused on some of the region's most important commercial fisheries production - including wild capture seafood as well as bivalve shellfish aquaculture. As a result of attending this virtual tour and a follow up online growers' discussion panel via zoom, 73% of survey respondents indicated they were more likely to seek out local producers and 100% of survey respondents indicated that they had a greater awareness of local agriculture production within the region. Though only a small number participated in the actual event (n=36), the videos are available online and are promoted continually to reach a larger audience. Although virtual events are met with hesitation from some stakeholder groups, the past 12 months have underscored the value of online resources from Extension professionals. This video provides a foundation for future programming efforts to highlight sustainable agriculture, and we plan to utilize various online platforms as an opportunity to enhance our reach raising awareness about some of Florida's most important commodities.

## **County Situation**

According to the 2017 Census of Agriculture, USDA, Manatee county is home to 753 farms utilizing at least 192,630 acres of land. Commercial agriculture production in the county includes a variety of vegetable crops, ornamental horticulture, livestock, wild seafood landings and aquaculture farming.

Commercial ornamental horticulture production is valued at over \$41 million, while livestock production is valued at over \$36 million, and wild seafood landings with over 10 million pounds annually valued at over \$11 million, in addition to aquaculture production.

The value of agriculture products produced and sold by Manatee county agriculture producers is estimated over \$360 million. However, the county is rapidly urbanizing due to its attractive location on the Gulf Coast of Mexico and warm weather during the cold winter months. And while many parts of the community understand the benefits of local agriculture, they may not actively support the various agriculture industries. With continued modernization of everyday lives, opportunities to engage and support local producers continue to fade away.

## **Public Relations**

Manatee County UF/IFAS and Florida Sea Grant Extension agents joined forces to highlight the local agriculture production of Manatee County. This program will act as a nucleus for future collaborations to raise ag awareness on the county and state level.

Objective 1: At least 50% of participants will increase their knowledge in one or more areas of agriculture productions highlighted in the program.

Objective 2: At least 50% of participants will indicate intent to purchase more locally farmed or caught agriculture products.

2020 pandemic has brought a series of unique challenges to university extension, in person education programs and agriculture tours. Thus, it is very important to keep supporting and promoting local agriculture for a diversified, happy community utilizing innovative methods of outreach to the public and local communities.

## **Program Execution**

In absence of in-person extension programs and the inability to host farm tours, the Manatee County Extension team in collaboration with local agriculture producers decided to present the farm tour in a virtual format accessible on most electronic devices. Six growers were highlighted in ~73-minute docuseries (3 parts). This docuseries discussed history, production systems, pest

management, best management practices, environmental conservation efforts, and a prospective on 2020 pandemic and impacts on agriculture. [Part 1](#) featured two ornamental horticulture producers with interesting production systems. [Part 2](#) highlighted two of the biggest county's ranches and their unique management styles. [Part 3](#) focused on some of the region's most important commercial fisheries including wild capture seafood as well as bivalve shellfish aquaculture.

## **Results and Evaluation**

As a result of attending this virtual tour, 73% of survey respondents indicated they were more likely to seek out local producers and 100% of survey respondents indicated that they had a greater awareness of seafood production within the region.

Although virtual events are met with hesitation from some stakeholder groups, the past 12 months have underscored the value of online resources from Extension professionals. This video provides a foundation for future programming efforts to highlight sustainable food production, and we plan to utilize the online format as an opportunity to enhance our reach raising awareness about some of Florida's most important commodities.

Docuseries part 1, Horticulture <https://youtu.be/9VG7pAWBO5I>

Docuseries part 2, Livestock <https://youtu.be/tSQx8gIORB4>

Docuseries part 3, Marine <https://youtu.be/lwgmqexWWhw>