Citrus On The Teche

The fruit is picked by Guidry and his relatives. The farm is located on Bayou Teche in St. Martin Parish.

ALVIN Guidry is a plant man. He grows pecans, persimmons, figs, and his favorite—citrus. His farm is the farthest north of any citrus farm in Louisiana, and maybe even in the South. Guidry is a horticulturist and a plant breeder. His 100-acre farm on the banks of Bayou Teche in St. Martin Parish produces a variety of citrus—including satsumas, navels and Louisiana sweet oranges, grapefruit, kumquats, lemons—and limequats, the latter a cross between limes and kumquats.

Guidry relaxed under the long branches of a 150-year-old oak on the banks of Bayou Teche to tell about his 15-acre project. “That tree, and several others like it, make my seed,” Guidry said, as he pointed to a thorny 20-foot tree that was covered with small, yellow fruit. “That tree is called a citrus trifoliata. It’s a native tree, and all the improved varieties are either grafted, or budded, to the rootstock. The rootstock from native trees is stronger and grows better in most areas.”

Alvin Guidry and his partner and cousin, Melvin Guidry, do all the grafting and budding of trees they sell and those they plant.

“Come over here and I’ll show you,” he said as he walked to the end of a satsuma row. “That root system, and trunk about six inches up from the ground, is native stock, just like that... Continued On Page 14
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Most citrus is budded. Here Guidry demonstrates budding citrus to native plants.

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tree over there. I budded a satsuma bud in the small tree when it was about two years old. When we get up to the house I'll show you exactly how it's done.

Most of Guidry's trees are about four years old. Although trees start bearing fruit at two, they reach maturity when they are about 10.

Guidry walked deep into the orchard, stooped and held up a limb loaded with satsumas. The fruit had about two weeks before harvest. "This tree will make about three bushels of fruit this year," he said. "But by the time it is 10 years old it will bear about five bushels." Citrus trees are planted 20 feet apart in rows. This means that there are 100 trees per acre. The middles (between the rows) are kept free of weeds, but grass is allowed to grow. The area in the rows under the trees is sprayed with herbicides so the area is kept clean. Guidry explains he plants Singletary peas in the fall to build up organic matter in the soil and keep the soil in good condition so it holds more moisture during the hot summer months.

"Conservation is important in citrus farming just like any other crop," says Guidry, who is one of the five supervisors of the St. Martin Soil and Water Conservation District. "I work with S. B. Gauthier, head of the Soil Conservation Service in Breaux Bridge, on all my conservation jobs," Guidry said. "He has helped me with drainage, irrigation, land smoothing, corrugating and other land problems. There's one thing for sure, if land isn't properly drained, citrus trees aren't going to grow very well.''

KEEPING the plants from freezing is a major problem for most citrus men, and Guidry is no exception. He does it in two or three ways. "The last major damaging freeze was in 1962," he said. "We had several days of 10-degree temperature, and we lost some 30-year-old trees. I don't care what you

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Guidry grows pecans, persimmons, figs and his favorite—citrus—on his farm.

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do, citrus trees just can't take that kind of weather."

At his young orchard, he pointed to several methods he was using to keep freeze damage to a minimum. "The SCS people helped me smooth this six-acre field and designed a small levee around it," Guidry explained. "I have an eight-inch well up there at the corner of the field, and if I have to I can flood the orchard with water that's well above freezing temperature. If the forecast is for extreme cold, I'll know about it one or two days in advance, thus giving me time to flood my orchards. Water on the roots and up about six inches from the ground will keep the roots and the lower part of the graft from freezing. Even of its top is killed, the plant will sprout back."

Guidry walked over to a young tree with some fruit on it and explained why the soil was mounded around the roots. "We use shovels to put soil around all our trees," Guidry said, as he stooped down to measure the height of the mound. "The principle is the same as with the water. Of course, soil hardy ever freezes more than an inch deep and it has to get down around 10 to 15 degrees for a day or two to do that. The soil here is about one foot above ground level. The graft is about six inches above the ground so that means we have a half-foot of soil protecting it. The graft will sprout back if the top does freeze."

Guidry fertilizes the trees each year with about one pound of fertilizer for every year of age. He puts the fertilizer out early in the spring, explaining this helps keep down freezing. "Trees need to do all their growing early so the wood will be tough in the fall and winter," he said. "Tender growth freezes easily."

Damage to the fruit is no concern to Guidry; he usually harvests between Oct. 15 and Nov. 15. "We seldom have enough cold weather to do any damage before those dates," he said. "Besides, mature fruit that is high in sugar and low in water will stand cold down to about 25 degrees."

Up to now, Guidry has sold all the fruit from his nursery yard. He has had no trouble selling what he grows at $5 for a 45- to 50-pound bushel. But he says that as production climbs, he will make additional plans to market his crop. The fruit is picked by Guidry and his kinfolks who live in the community. Guidry said that lime trees don't do too well in the area because they're more susceptible to cold damage. The limequat grows well and is similar to lime.

Back at the headquarters Guidry explained more about grafting and budding. Seed from native trees are planted in the field. When the young trees are about two years old they are dug and brought to the plant center at the headquarters. The young trees are planted in cans. Guidry walked over to an area where over 300 cans of young trees were, "You take the young native trees and slit the bark on one side, about six inches from the base." Guidry said, as he pulled out a budding knife which has a special blade. "Then you cut off a bud from a variety that you want to bud, just like this Louisiana sweet orange here. Then you slip the bud in the slit bark of the native tree and wrap it with a wide rubber band. After the bud starts growing well, the top of the native plant can be cut back."

Guidry demonstrated how he grafts. Most citrus is budded, but pecans are usually grafted. He has about 60 acres of pecans that are all grafted. A young tree is cut off above the ground. A small limb about 4 or 5 inches long, is slipped between the bark and wood of the native pecan tree. The wood is then coated with wax to keep out water. The graft usually starts growing in 30-45 days. Does Guidry’s citrus fruit taste better? Well, he says, they probably don’t, but when they come from the banks of the Bayou Teche, there’s something special about them that makes you come back for more.