GROWERTALKS

GT in Brief

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A New Deep South Trial Comes to Homestead

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For more than a decade, the Florida industry (and beyond) enjoyed Costa Farms' Season Premiere Trial, held every winter at Costa Color. It was well laid out, well grown, featured pretty much all the breeding companies, timed with TPIE in January for a visit, as well as throughout the winter and spring, and gave the industry a chance to see how our varieties held up in extreme sun, heat and humidity. But, alas, the cost in money and manpower to run a trial like that is considerable, and Costa made the decision to focus on other projects. The final Season Premiere was 2023.

But don't despair because the University of Florida has your back! They've launched a new trial in Homestead at the Tropical Research & Education Center, just 10 minutes from Costa's old trial grounds, and under the able direction of Assistant Professor Xingbo Wu. He's been stationed in Homestead since 2022 and is working on breeding and researching a range of interesting plants.

Dr. Wu attended Season Premiere a couple of times and as a plant breeder he appreciated the value it brought to the industry, which is why he took on the project of launching a UF trial. But it's not a relocation of Season Premiere—it's a whole new trial under a different name (TBD). He's had the support of Costa's R&D VP John Sieg and Marta Maria Garcia from Dümmen Orange (and formerly with Costa) in getting it off the ground. They started out "trialing the trial" in 2024 and 2025, testing the growing conditions and bed layout. This year was their first "official" trial, with ten 8-ft. by 50-ft. raised beds and five breeders: Dümmen Orange, Ball FloraPlant, PanAmerican Seed, Danziger and Benary. Plants go in Week 35 and stay in the ground until the summer heat melts them away … and if they survive that, well, the breeders know they've got something extra tough!

Long-range, he's got an acre of ground at his disposal and space enough for 50 beds, so the trial can grow if the industry supports his efforts. He's also got a grad student and a Trial Manager to help.

Dr. Wu emphasized that this will be a truly independent trial. Not that Costa's wasn't … but there was always the lingering thought that perhaps breeders were participating to stay on the good side of an important customer. I'm not saying they were … just that at UF, there will be zero commercial connections or relationships.

Dr. Wu is also planning on getting out to other trials to compare notes and get ideas—namely, the Southern Garden Tour Trials in June. **GT**