

Suwannee Valley Watermelon Crop Update- April 1, 2020
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Hello watermelon growers and allied industry reps as well. I hope everyone is doing well and staying safe. This year is certainly going to be a memorable one given so much uncertainty. We all at UF/IFAS want you to know, even though we have many restrictions on travel, that we want to support your needs as much as possible. It will definitely not be “business as usual” for our interactions with you in the field. Some county agents are in counties with very strict travel restrictions and the NFREC-SV is closed and only 2 farm staff are allowed in to irrigate and try to keep existing crop trials alive in the fields. Contact your Extension agent to let them know what needs you have, and we will try to determine how we can help. Urgent crop situations that may need a farm visit to solve will require special permission for that travel. We mainly want you to know we want to figure out how we can assist you and the crop needs.

The 2020 crop is off to a very fast start with the unusually high daytime and night temperatures during most of March. This will likely mean an early harvest period which may or may not be good as related to the status of consumer demand in mid- May. Because of this concern and market uncertainty, it only makes sense to me to provide the crop what inputs are obviously needed, but to be conservative with input decisions. We will try to help each week with these general decisions.

Disease update: The crops look very clean right now. The only confirmed reports of any disease were gummy stem blight on isolated shipments of transplants. Fields with clean transplants are still clean. The dry conditions during March have helped keep the crop disease-free so far. As a result, I recommend staying on a weekly Bravo or other chlorothalonil schedule for this early part of the season, perhaps the first four sprays or so.

Insect update: We have seen evidence of thrips feeding on watermelon leaves. The feeding symptoms are small random scratched areas on upper leaf surface. The scratched areas look grayish or light green but are only on the leaf surface. Populations are usually high in late March and early April. Thrips pose little economic concern in watermelons, so don't be alarmed if you see this feeding damage. Squash bugs have been active over the past 2-3 weeks and have posed a threat in certain fields. Squash bugs pierce and suck on the watermelon plants and seem to prefer the base of the stems. We don't fully know the damage from this insect, but early in the season when plants are small, they can cause serious damage to young transplants. Scout the field perimeters, as this is where they move into the fields first. If only the perimeters have squash bugs, spray only the perimeters so you minimize killing beneficials throughout the field. Follow labelled precautions for bees as well. Any labeled pyrethroid will kill them if you get good coverage and that is the key because they like to hide under the plastic adjacent to the holes or under leaves where it is shaded. It may be important to reduce these early populations to keep the populations from becoming so high at harvest. We are testing a squash bug trap cropping system on two farms in Levy County. We planted sections of the field perimeters with squash to see if we can

attract them to the extra squash plants and kill them on the squash plants before they migrate to the watermelons. The idea seems like it may be very promising. Stay tuned.

Leaf tissue and petiole sap testing: This will be a service we will try to provide, but it may be on a very limited basis this year due to travel restrictions. Let us know if you need advice on managing your fertigation program. Remember leaf tissue samples can also be sent to a commercial lab for analysis and we can help interpret those results for you.