

# Pomegranates could become new cash crop for Florida, researcher says

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Supplies of a nutritious and popular fruit could increase in Florida in the next few years, thanks to the research of a University of Florida professor emeritus.

William Castle, who specializes in [horticultural science](#) at UF's Citrus Research and Education Center in Lake Alfred, is studying the viability of pomegranate production in Florida. The [fruit](#) is not currently produced commercially in the state.

[Pomegranates](#) are small, shrubby trees native to the Middle East and have apple-sized fruits with a red exterior and numerous juicy, edible arils inside. The aril covers the pomegranate seed and has a sweet, tart taste. The fruit contains healthy compounds such as antioxidants, nutrients and vitamins.

Castle, a member of UF's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, started the study in 2009. He and Jim Baldwin, a senior biologist at the Citrus REC, are examining nutrition and irrigation requirements, pest, weed and disease threats, maintenance needs, and genetic differences among more than 80 types of pomegranates in two locations in Central Florida — the Citrus REC and a water reuse site called Water Conserv II in Winter Garden.

The researchers enlisted the help of more than 30 growers from around the state to plant pomegranates and gauge their performance.

Castle said the study, which he started to investigate pomegranates as an alternative to citrus for small-scale producers, is showing that pomegranates grow well in Florida and have irrigation and fertilization requirements similar to citrus. Growers are considering alternatives to citrus in light of the emergence of citrus greening, a disease that poses a threat to the [citrus](#) industry.

“I personally am convinced that absolutely you can grow the plant,” Castle said. “It certainly can produce flowers, and it can set fruit. The trick now is to learn how to keep the fruit on the plant, and I think we’ll have something good.”

Florida growers’ interest in pomegranates is on the rise, he said, as evidenced by the more than 5,000 plants he’s distributed to commercial producers and home growers.

“There is considerable buzz,” Castle said.

Cindy and David Weinstein, owners of Green Sea Farms in Hardee County, Fla., were attracted to pomegranates for the fruit’s nutritious qualities and its potential as a high-dollar, niche-crop for small-scale producers. They started helping with Castle’s research after finding out about the project through a local UF/IFAS extension office and are now growing more than 200 plants.

“We have two acres planted right now,” Cindy Weinstein said. “And hopefully next year we’ll expand that by another two.”

The Weinstains plan to sell pomegranate fruit and liners, or young plants intended to be replanted by other growers for later sale to customers.

Pomegranates can be grown for fresh fruit, juice and also for use as an edible ornamental in home and business landscapes.

If production takes off in the state, Castle said consumers could see Florida pomegranates next to California pomegranates in stores as well as the emergence of locally produced pomegranate juice and juice blends.

“If we succeed in producing the fruit like we’re talking about, then there’s a lot of opportunity for anybody interested in the ornamental plant trade, anybody that’s interested in the fresh fruit trade at the local market basis, or even in producing the juice,” he said.

In California, an acre of the crop can bring in more than \$5,000 in revenue, and fresh pomegranates sell for up to \$2 a fruit.

“It is a very profitable business in California,” he said. “And if we can achieve similar yields, we can sell fresh fruit at similar prices.”

Castle will present his findings at the Florida State Horticultural Society’s annual meeting June 6 in St. Petersburg.

Provided by University of Florida

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