

Bumblebees boost blueberry yield

Bumblebees can boost blueberry yield by 70 percent, a University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences study shows.

The news also accentuates the need for blueberry pollinators, said Joshua Campbell, a post-doctoral researcher in the UF/IFAS entomology and nematology department.

After caging bumblebee hives with highbush blueberry bushes, researchers found that 70 percent of the flowers produced blueberries, while less than 10 percent of those without bumblebee hives produced blueberries. That's helpful news for blueberry growers, said Campbell, co-author of a new study published in the *Journal of Environmental Entomology*.

"We think our findings are very relevant for growers who are growing blueberries in greenhouses and high tunnels," Campbell said.

Like other fruit plants, blueberries need pollinators, such as bees, to grow. Farmers are growing increasingly dependent on western honeybees, scientists say. But bumblebees are more active in poor weather and pollinate highbush blueberries more, so UF/IFAS researchers wanted to test bumblebees on a local blueberry farm.

Thus, researchers conducted their experiment on a large commercial blueberry farm in North Florida and found good results.

Florida blueberry growers already use bumblebees on their farms, but until now, they lacked evidence to back the use of such bees on highbush blueberries, Campbell said.

The Sunshine State only has five bumblebee species. But most are fairly common in central and northern Florida, Campbell said. Only one of these – the type used in the UF/IFAS research -- can be managed and utilized to pollinate.

In order to obtain a good commercial yield, a grower would need to augment the bumblebee population by placing hives within their fields, Campbell said.

The biggest chunk of Florida's blueberry crop is grown in Alachua, Lake, Marion, Putnam and Sumter counties, an area that accounts for about 40 percent of the state blueberry acreage.

Next in acreage is an area that includes Hernando, Hillsborough, Orange, Pasco and Polk counties.

Because Florida blueberry production comes from early ripening varieties, Florida growers receive higher prices from April to May, when they are the main suppliers, according to a UF/IFAS Extension document, <http://bit.ly/2ohUaeU>.

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