

Florida Citrus Hall of Fame Inductees Chosen

The three-member 2014 class will include a posthumous award.

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WINTER HAVEN | The CEO at a Lake Wales juice processor and an emeritus professor at Florida Southern College will join the Florida Citrus Hall of Fame next year.

Steve Caruso, CEO of Florida's Natural Growers, the nation's third largest OJ seller, and Rubert Prevatt, emeritus professor of horticulture and citrus at the Lakeland college, will be inducted at a March 7 luncheon at Florida Southern, the Hall of Fame's home, according to a news statement released Wednesday.

"I pride myself on knowing a little bit about everything in this business, but this caught me by surprise," said Caruso, 65, from his Lake Wales office. "My first reaction was I'm not old enough, but then I counted up the years. I've been in the Florida citrus business 43 years."

The late Robert Pitman Jr., who ran an Apopka plant nursery, will be inducted posthumously in the three-member 2014 class.

Caruso joined his family company, Southern Fruit Distributors in Orlando, upon graduating in 1970 from Florida State University with a degree in finance. He still resides in Orlando.

Caruso joined Florida's Natural as chief operating officer in 1986, when Southern Fruit sold its BlueBird brand to the cooperative. He became CEO in 1993.

The Citrus Hall statement cites Caruso for building the Florida's Natural brand from its 1987 launch into the third biggest not-from-concentrate OJ product in the U.S.

It also recognizes him for leading the company's efforts to improve fruit quality and for helping the industry restructure after devastation from the 2004 and 2005 hurricanes.

"My best legacy, I guess, would be I always had smarter people around me to help get things done," said Caruso, who credited retired advertising vice president Walt Lincer as "the main driving force" behind building the Florida's Natural brand.

After working in private industry with agriculture and phosphate fertilizers, Prevatt, 88, of Lakeland, joined Florida Southern as professor of horticulture and citrus in 1970 and became chairman of the department in the early 1980s. He retired in 1990.

During his 29 years, Prevatt trained the citrus production managers currently responsible for more than 60 percent of the state's 524,640 grove acres, the Citrus Hall statement says.

"Dr. Prevatt probably educated more currently working production managers than any other five people in the state. It's his knowledge base that's running the industry," said Malcolm Manners, his successor as department chairman. "It's a long overdue and well deserved recognition."

Prevatt described his reaction at receiving the news of his induction as "Arrgh!"

The emeritus professor said he was proud of bringing a practical, hand on approach to his classes, emphasizing field trips and putting students together with working production people in the groves.

He also trained students in the full range of disciplines, from horticulture to economics, they would need to succeed in an agri-business.

Pitman is recognized for his contributions to the nursery industry and getting the Florida Legislature to pass the "Greenbelt law," which gives significant property tax exemptions to agricultural land.

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