Hurricane Donna: The 40th anniversary
1960 hurricane devastated central Florida citrus groves.

By John Attaway

Hurricane Donna stripped fruit and
uprooted trees from Ft. Myers to
Palm Beach County, according to the
Orlando Sentinel of September 10-11, 1960. Donna was the last major hurricane to devastate the central Florida citrus industry. As the eye of Donna passed over Ft. Myers, damage was extensive, with orange and grapefruit groves severely affected. Following the hurricane, growers were faced with the challenge of regrowing their orchards and recovering from the damage.

Watching in Horror

As the afternoon progressed and night fell on Sept. 10, growers watched with horror as the strongest winds of the hurricane passed through orange and grapefruit groves, first in Lee and Hendry counties, then Charlotte, DeSoto, and Highlands. Pork, Orange, and adjacent counties were affected.

OVERALL LOSSES

The overall loss from Hurricane Donna was estimated at $175 million, making it one of the most destructive hurricanes in Florida history. The storm caused significant damage to citrus orchards, with orange and grapefruit groves particularly affected. The hurricane was a reminder of the vulnerability of the citrus industry to natural disasters, and the importance of preparedness and resilience in the face of such events.

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**WHAT WOULD HAPPEN TODAY?**

If a hurricane equivalent to Donna passed north through Collier, Lee, Hendry, Charlotte, DeSoto and counties to the north in 2000 or later, what would be the impact on the industry? Undoubtedly, there would be a heavy loss of fruit and many trees would be uprooted.

However, today’s grower has replaced the old 50-trees-per-acre configuration with dense plantings of 100 or more trees per acre, both in beds in the flatwoods and in the south ridge. Many newly-planted groves are on different rootstocks and the trees are harder. Old groves with tall trees, some weakened by footrot and other maladies, are less common.

One day we will find out. Hopefully, that day will be far in the future.

Attaway is the retired scientific director of the Florida Department of Citrus, a grower and author of "Hurricanes and Florida Agriculture." The book is available from Florida Science Source, Inc., phone (941) 353-4680.