

40 Years of 4Rs

Gary Reeder grows 1,000 acres of fresh market tomatoes for West Coast Tomato near Duette, Fla. A fourth-generation farmer, he's been farming for 40 years and is a longtime advocate for farmers in Manatee County. He works side-by-side with Dennis Coleman, certified crop adviser at Crop Production Services, to determine the perfect nutrition formulation for his tomato plants.

Reeder has been following the 4Rs long before there was an official name. He and his team raise two tomato crops each year. Growing them in plastic-covered, mulch beds helps prevent fertilizer leaching.

Gary has been named **Outstanding Agriculturist** and inducted into the Manatee County Agricultural Hall of Fame

Constant soil testing ensures the right nutrients are provided for the crops. Using the Mehlich III extraction method for testing his sandy soils, following recommendations of the University of Florida, Reeder and Coleman are able to estimate plant nutrient availability of most macronutrients and micronutrients. This allows them to make the right nutrient decisions to influence plant vitality and quality.

Delivering the right nutrients properly from the first day of planting is the only option. A starter fertilizer is incorporated into the bed that has nitrogen for plant growth, phosphorous for root growth and potash to



MEET THE ADVOCATES

Grower: Gary Reeder, West Coast Tomato, Palmetto, FL (right).

Crop Advisor: Dennis Coleman, Crop Production Services, Parrish, FL (left).

ensure fruit quality. During the growing season two hot bands of high-analysis fertilizer are laid at the bed shoulders ensuring nutrients are provided at the right time and right place as plants mature and bear fruit. Once the starter fertilizer has done its job, the mix from the hot bands is delivered with the help of seep irrigation.

Tomatoes need a lot of water to grow well, and irrigation management ties in directly to how well fertilizer works in the tomato beds. Reeder's irrigation system is certified at a 94 percent efficiency level by the state of Florida. In fact, they are able to conserve enough water that they never use their permitted allotments, saving the farm money.

His passion for farming, water conservation, youth education and agricultural awareness make him a natural agricultural leader in the region. He has been named Outstanding Agriculturist and inducted into the Manatee County Agricultural Hall of Fame. He works with The Nature Conservancy to educate area farmers on the importance of water quality and benefits of 4R practices.

“We’ve been implementing the 4Rs since before the practices were named.”

BEST PRACTICE MANAGEMENT

> Soil samples between two annual market tomato crops and follows the recommendations for sandy soils from the University of Florida to create application recommendations for each crop

“If you don’t have the right formula in those beds, you can’t fix it from above. If nutrients are not there to go through those roots and up to the plants, they’re simply not going to be there when the plants need them.”

- > Starter fertilizer is incorporated into the plant bed pre-planting which contains nitrogen for plant growth, phosphorous for root growth and potash to ensure fruit quality. Incorporation of fertilizer reduces the potential for nutrient loss.
- > Seep irrigation is used to apply high-analysis fertilizer prescriptions at the shoulder of the tomato beds during the growing season, providing nutrients when the plants are most actively taking them up
- > Tomato crops are raised in plastic-covered mulch beds to mitigate fertilizer leaching, moisture loss and weed growth
- > Manages pH at 7.0 to optimize nutrient availability for tomatoes
- > Controls water usage and fertilizer application via irrigation and has a certified 94% efficiency level from the state of Florida
- > Cover crops are planted after harvest to take up remaining nutrients and reduce soil loss

> Works with The Nature Conservancy to educate area farmers on the importance of water quality and benefits of 4R practices.

Irrigation system has a 94% efficiency rating from the state of Florida

