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## Florida Fresh Fruit Shipments Drop

**Fall a result of crop declines, smaller fruit sizes and a late harvest.**

By [Kevin Bouffard](#)

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WINTER HAVEN | Florida fresh fruit shipments have declined more than 20 percent so far this season because of crop declines, smaller fruit sizes and a later start to the harvesting season.

Through Dec. 15, total fresh shipments have fallen 24.5 percent compared with the same point in the 2012-13 season and almost 30 percent compared with 2011-12, according to the Lakeland-based Citrus Administrative Committee, a fresh industry regulatory group. Grapefruit shipments have dropped 23.4 percent since last season, fresh oranges 25 percent and tangerines, tangelos and other specialty varieties by 26 percent.

Fresh citrus represents a much smaller segment of the Florida citrus industry, dominated by juice processing, but it is particularly important in Polk County, the top producer of tangerines and tangelos and home to three of the state's 10 largest packinghouses in Dundee, Haines City and Lake Wales.

Most packinghouses didn't begin harvesting until the middle of October because this season's fruit was late in reaching minimum maturity standards, said Mike Garavaglia, chief financial officer at The Packers of Indian River Inc. in Fort Pierce and a member of the Florida Citrus Commission. That compares with many that started shipping last season as early as September.

"I think timing is a significant issue this season," he said.

But there's also less fruit to sell because of a smaller projected 2013-14 harvest, down 9 percent for oranges and grapefruit compared to 2012-13, according to the most recent U.S. Department of Agriculture crop report. It projected the orange crop at 121 million boxes, the lowest since the freeze-damaged 1989-90 crop, and grapefruit at 16.7 million boxes.

The USDA also reported record low fruit sizes for all citrus varieties in 2013-14. That affects the crop totals and shipments because it takes more fruit to fill up the standard 1.6 bushel box.

There is some hope fruit size will improve for the fruit remaining on the tree, Garavaglia said.

"One telltale sign is we have two varieties that have completed harvesting,

ambersweet oranges and fallglo tangerines," said Duke Chadwell, Citrus Administrative Committee manager. "Ambersweet shipments are down just 12 percent this season and for fallglo, they're down just 11 percent."

But the size problem has affected wholesale prices because retailers won't pay as much for smaller fruit, he added.

That's particularly true for grapefruit because consumers expect large sizes.

The average wholesale price for a carton of No. 1 grade white grapefruit through Dec. 15 has fallen 4.7 percent while the red grapefruit price has plummeted 16 percent, according to a Citrus Committee report.

Total fresh fruit revenue for all grades through the first two months of the season declined 44 percent for grapefruit, 33 percent for oranges and 24 percent for tangerines and other specialty varieties, including tangelos, said Matt Salois, the chief economist at the Florida Department of Citrus.

"Prices for red grapefruit are down considerably because of quality issues and fruit size," Salois said.

Quality issues refer to the external appearance of the fruit, such as wind scarring, an important purchasing factor for consumers. Garavaglia attributed the quality issues to the wind and heavy rains earlier this year, a common problem with growing citrus in a semi-tropical climate.

"Florida is definitely not about having the most beautiful grapefruit. It's about having premium-tasting fruit," he said.

Size has also affected grapefruit shipments to Japan, the second-largest global market for Florida grapefruit. Through Nov. 24, export volumes to Japan have declined 41 percent, according to the Florida Department of Citrus.

Size and quality are particularly important to Japanese consumers, said Garavaglia, whose company is a major grapefruit supplier to Japan.

Polk leads the state's citrus-producing counties with 81,696 grove acres and 9.9 million trees in 2013, according to U.S. Department of Agriculture data. It historically leads the state in citrus production, as it did in the 2012-13 season with nearly 24.6 million boxes.