

Crowning Achievement

MARK DELLERMAN HAS BROUGHT PINEAPPLES BACK TO INDIAN RIVER COUNTY — AND THEY'RE BETTER THAN EVER

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY PATRICK MERRELL

When most people think of pineapples, Hawaii comes to mind. But 120 years ago, Florida was the pineapple capital of the United States — and one of the largest producers in the world. From the late 1800s until about 1920, pineapple farms lined Florida's Atlantic Coast in a narrow swath abutting the Indian River Lagoon, from Miami to just north of Vero Beach. There were additional farms on the Gulf Coast, in the center of the state and on the Florida Keys. In 1908, over 1.1 million crates of pineapples were shipped, the state's best year ever. If you'd like to do the math, each crate held 24-48 pineapples, depending on the size of the fruit.

Looking around Florida today, you'd never know that a thriving pineapple industry ever existed. In fact, if it weren't for Nature Farms Inc., a 25-acre farm in Sebastian that's owned and run by Mark Dellerman, there would be no commercial pineapple farming left at all.



A cluster of purple flowers and their accompanying bracts fuse together to gradually grow into a single pineapple fruit.



Mark Dellerman (right) has grown pineapples on his 25-acre farm in Sebastian since 2001. This season, his brother-in-law Andy Cox joined him full-time.



Dellerman puts in new plants every year. They'll start bearing fruit after a year or two, making up for older plants that have become less productive.



Hand-painted signs on U.S.1 alert passersby that pineapples are available.

“There are a couple of small plots around the state,” Dellerman says. “But for the last 10-15 years, I’m the only small commercial operation in the continental United States. It’s a forgotten art,” he explains. “But I’m a life-long farmer, this is my way of life. I enjoy growing pineapples and serving my local community. My joy comes when people take a bite of the fruit, it drips down their shirt, they lean forward and say, ‘Oh, my God, that’s the best pineapple I’ve ever had.’”

Dellerman has built up a large and loyal following from when he first started growing pineapples in 2001. “Between social media and the eating quality of our fruit, our customer base has grown 20-30 fold. And people are very enthusiastic about local pineapples,” he says. “We have people driving from as far as north of Gainesville, as far south as Fort Lauderdale, and as far west as Tampa.”

The varieties he grows has something to do with that – including his own unique hybrid he calls the Florida Gold – but there’s one inescapable fact that sets his product apart. U.S. supermarkets import all their pineapples, which means they have to be picked and packed when green. According to a USDA farmers bulletin, “While green fruit becomes yellow and edible before it reaches the consumer, it is never equal in sweetness or flavor to fruit which has been permitted to ripen on the plant.”

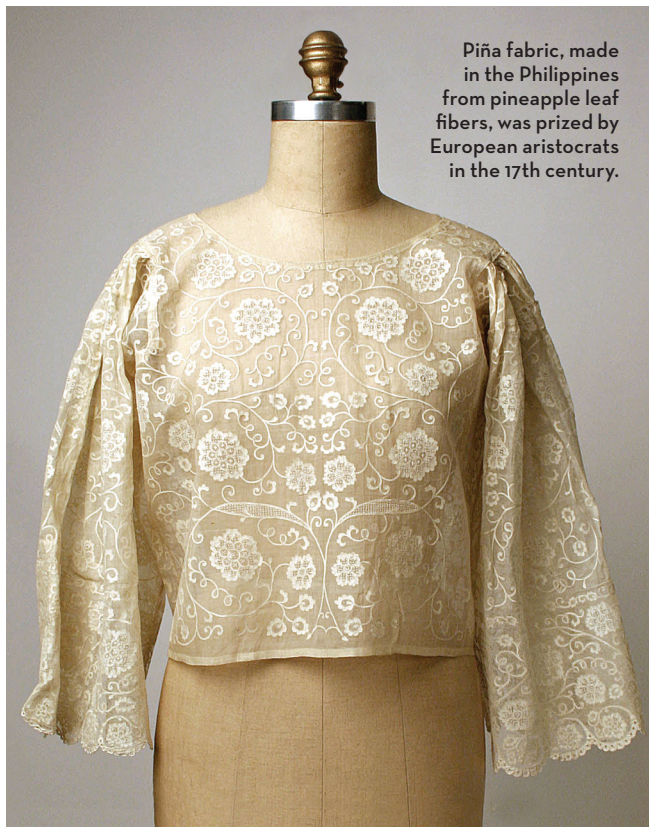
Dellerman’s pineapples are priced from \$4.00 for a small one to \$7.50 for a jumbo and are available from mid-June to



It takes roughly six months for a pineapple to fully mature, with a single fruit growing on each plant.



In this painting by Hendrick Danckerts, circa 1677, Charles II is being presented with what's said to be the first pineapple grown in England.



Piña fabric, made in the Philippines from pineapple leaf fibers, was prized by European aristocrats in the 17th century.

mid-August. On Saturdays, he has a stand in front of his farm on U.S. 1 just north of Rock City Gardens. Monday-Friday, his fruit can be bought from several nearby vendors along U.S. 1: AKOHO, A Kitchen of Her Own, in a small strip mall adjacent to his farm and Sturgis Lumber just down the road in Gifford. He also supplies several restaurants, as well as local breweries and a rum distiller, who use it to flavor their quaffs.

How did Dellerman come to be Florida's sole-surviving "Pineapple Man"? We'll get to that, but let's back up even further to find out how pineapples found their way to Florida.

The wild pineapple is native to southern Brazil and Paraguay. It was domesticated by Indians and eventually spread northward to Central America and the Caribbean. The Maya and Aztec cultivated it, where it became a dietary staple.

In 1493, Christopher Columbus and his men first tasted this exotic, new fruit while dining with cannibals on the Caribbean archipelago of Gaudeloupe. It already had a name, "ananas," meaning "excellent fruit," but the Spanish thought it looked like a pine cone and referred to it instead as "piña de Indes," which translates to "pine of the Indians."

Beginning in the mid-16th century, Portuguese and Spanish ships helped spread pineapples around the world – to Africa, India, China, Java and the Philippines. In the Philippines, pineapple cultivation served a second purpose. Workers would painstakingly separate and clean fibers from the long, sword-shaped pineapple leaves. The resulting silklike thread could then be woven into fine cloth called piña.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, pineapples came to be a prized luxury among European aristocrats. Given the cold winters there, expensive hothouses called "pineries" were the only way to grow them. Charles II, Louis XV and even Catherine the Great enjoyed pineapples raised on their estates.

Although the U.S. was much closer to the Caribbean than any of those places, it wasn't until 1860 that Benjamin Baker planted the first pineapple patch in Florida, on Plantation Key. The growing conditions, and subsequent profits, turned out to be ... well, fruitful, and others quickly followed in his furrows by planting pineapples throughout the Keys and then on the Florida mainland. For comparison, Dole's first 64-acre plantation in Hawaii didn't begin growing pineapples until 1900, with Del Monte's following in 1917. And both were primarily canning operations.

By the turn of the century, the pineapple industry in Florida was booming, especially along the Atlantic Coastal Ridge, a dune created during the Ice Age that sits about 5 to 20 feet higher than the adjacent land. In Vero Beach and Fort Pierce, this area was called the Golden Ridge, because of all the pineapples.

Scandinavian immigrants established groves on Old Dixie Highway near Oslo Road, most notably Alex Hallstrom with his 40-acre plantation. Other settlers grew pineapples alongside other crops, including on the barrier islands. "Winter Beach, Wabasso – they grew pineapples," Indian River County Historian Ruth Stanbridge says, "And where Indian River Shores is today, there were little farms that grew them."

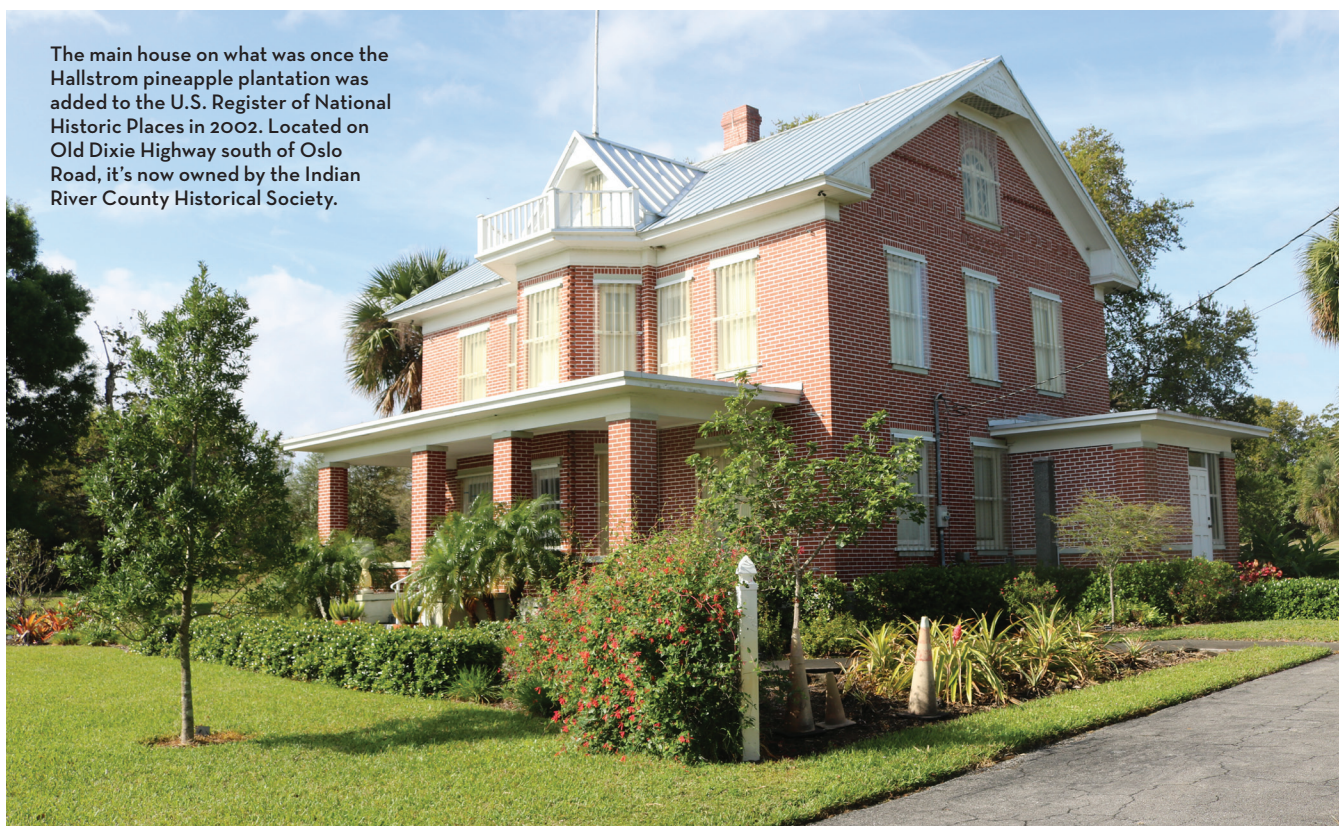


Pineapples, a symbol of hospitality, can be found throughout Vero Beach (from left to right): along A1A, on 14th Street, at Hallstrom House and atop a mailbox post on 11th Lane. Numerous parks, neighborhoods, streets, restaurants and stores throughout Florida include “Pineapple” in their names.

Henry Flagler’s railroad played a pivotal role in Florida’s pineapple industry – in 1896 when it reached Miami and then again in 1912 when it reached Key West. “In the beginning,” Dellerman says, “everything went by cargo boat, and distribution was limited. But when the railway came, they were shipping fruits to Chicago and all over the United States. It was a boon for 10-15 years, but once they got the bridge built and got to Key West, it backfired.” Suddenly Cuban pineapples, which could be grown much cheaper, had easy access to the United States market.

But that wasn’t the only problem. “Freezes, diseases and importation of Cuban pineapples,” Dellerman says. “That was the demise of the industry.” A disease called “wilt” increasingly infected Florida farms, brought on by attacks from nematodes, wormlike pests in the soil. On top of that, fertilizers became scarce, especially during World War I. The final blow was a pair of freezes in 1917 that wiped out entire groves. Farmers were desperate to replant their fields using new “slips,” shoots from existing plants, but Havana was the only available source, and the Cubans weren’t selling.

The main house on what was once the Hallstrom pineapple plantation was added to the U.S. Register of National Historic Places in 2002. Located on Old Dixie Highway south of Oslo Road, it’s now owned by the Indian River County Historical Society.





Dellerman sells pineapples from mid-June to mid-August in front of his farm on Saturdays. Several nearby stores on U.S.1 sell them from Monday-Friday.

“I couldn’t be blessed any more, being a dirt farmer.”

— MARK DELLERMAN

It was around that time that Mark Dellerman’s family got into farming – but it was with citrus, not pineapples. “Around 1920, my grandfather, Frank Bates, got a job with the USDA as a fruit inspector,” Dellerman says. “And he saw the opportunity in citrus. So while he was working for the USDA, he started looking for land, and he started buying his own groves.” Bates ended up accumulating 22 different parcels in Indian River County totaling 900 acres, and 130 more in DeSoto County. He named his enterprise Frank Bates Groves Inc., and in 1936 he partnered with Marshall Barnes to create the Indian River Packing Co. in Gifford.

“My grandfather took care of the packing facility and the sales and marketing of the citrus and my dad managed the groves,” Dellerman says. “We grew navel oranges, tangelos, Hamlin oranges, tangerines, temples, pink grapefruit, reds, whites.”

“I started on the farm at age 7. In the beginning, I was just riding around with my father in the truck. But when I started showing an interest, he would give me small things to do,” Dellerman says. “My job would be pulling weeds and hoeing around young trees. When I was about 8 or 9, I became real familiar with a grub hoe.”

He's remained involved in the family's groves ever since, although at one point, just barely. "When my grandfather passed away in 1983, he left it all to my mother. And she died five years later, so we got hit with two estate taxes, back to back." Farm Credit of Florida foreclosed and Dellerman says, "I lost everything but this one parcel I'm working now."

At first he tried growing navel oranges on it, then vegetables, but neither worked out. "It's hard to go up against competitors like Sam's Club, Publix, Winn-Dixie." Then, in 2001, he says, "I sort of stumbled across pineapples." A friend whose uncle worked at Publix was collecting leftover pineapple crowns from the kitchen each day, taking them home and then planting them in his yard. "When his two acres were full up," Dellerman says, "my friend started getting all these crowns from his uncle and brought me truckloads. So I started out planting crowns at the beginning."

It takes 2-3 years to grow pineapples that way, about a year longer than from using slips, which grow off the base of the fruit, or "suckers," which emerge from the plant's base. But now that his grove is firmly established, he can generate new plants from the ones he already has.

"I plant new rows each year," he says. "That way we always have young plants producing. Your younger plants produce bigger fruit and your older plants produce smaller fruit. You

can harvest off some rows for two or three years."

One thing that becomes apparent when talking with Mark Dellerman at any length is how much he knows about pineapples and farming, and how detailed he can get when discussing the science and history of both.

"I learned things from my family and through education and through experience," he says. "I always worked side by side with my father, and when he died when I was 19, the foreman of the groves, he kind of took me under his wing and was like a mentor." But there's more lurking under that sun-weathered exterior than meets the eye.

"Over the last 40 years, I've always had continuing education – at the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences and at Indian River Community College. I also frequently communicate with scientists and others in the pineapple industry in both Hawaii and Costa Rica." All that knowledge is reflected in the carefully tended rows of plants in his field.

"I'm just a dirt farmer. I like to provide a good-eating pineapple to the local community. And I basically only pay my expenses each year. But to be able to wake up and kick the dirt like I did all my life is a blessing. And then I grow something that's unique, and I'm just happy. I couldn't be blessed any more, being a dirt farmer." 🌿

Several local breweries use Dellerman's pineapples to make seasonal ales – Pareidolia and Mash Monkeys in Sebastian and Sailfish in Fort Pierce. In Sailfish's case, they named their double IPA in honor of Dellerman: Pineapple Man.

