



Selwyn and his dad, DeWayne, in the orchards with Selwyn's daughter Scarlett.

DeWayne and Selwyn Justice operate Justice Brothers Ranch in Maricopa County. Like his father, Selwyn has lived on the farm his entire life. His family has a rich history in agriculture: His dad's side of the family has been farming the land they are on today since 1928, and his mom's dad worked his family's dairy when he was young man, but got out of farming in favor of ironworking. Selwyn's mom married her family back into farming, and she worked Justice Brothers Ranch for the better part of two decades.

Selwyn's great-grandfather purchased the ground in 1928 and developed it with the help of his two sons. With 4 generations calling Justice Brothers Ranch home, and Selwyn and DeWayne working the land together, the Justice's operation truly is a family farm. Selwyn's daughter aspires to farming, but she's not quite five, so right now she's in charge of finding interesting sticks and stones in the orchards and exercising her favorite horse.

The farm is a little short of 400 acres. Citrus is grown on 71 of those acres, and the orchard is organically certified. Most of their Red Grapefruit, Navel and Valencia Oranges, Minneola Tangelos, and Lisbon Lemons trees are over 50 years old. The rest of the Justice Brothers Ranch

is used to pasture graze Charolais-Herford beef cattle.

Most people do not realize that every commercially productive citrus tree is actually two different trees growing as one. The bottom of the tree, called the rootstock, is a variety of citrus selected for its toughness in the climate and its compatibility with the top of the tree, called the scion, which is the part of the tree that produces fruit. The buds of the scion are grafted to the rootstock by either peeling back the bark of the rootstock, leaving just the tip of the bud showing so it can grow, or by literally cutting and taping the scion to the rootstock until it heals, like a bandage. This is referred to as “budding” or “grafting”.

For example, the most common rootstock for Lisbon Lemons (the classic, tart and acidic lemon variety) is a citron/orange called “citrange”. The fruit-bearing part of the tree is 100% lemon, but the stock is 100% citrange. The lemon portion of the tree is basically using the citron roots to get water and nutrients, while the citrange roots use the lemon portion of tree for the photosynthesis that occurs in the lemons leaves.

Because of the budding or grafting citrus trees require, commercial citrus growers don’t typically raise their trees from seed. Seedlings are usually raised, instead, by wholesale nurseries to about two years and then grafted. The young trees (referred to as whips) are then planted and tended to by the farmers for another 5 years before they become commercially productive.

Harvest begins in November and by then the fruit has color and is hanging heavy in the trees. Lemons and grapefruit are the first to be picked, and the navel oranges ripen later in the season (and the Justice’s pick them riper as well, due to the shorter supply chain). Eventually the Valencias ripen, and the grapefruit will continue to produce through June.

Citrus is harvested by hand, and placed in over-the-shoulder harvesting bags which hold roughly 65lbs. Depending on the volume of the order, the bags are then carried and emptied into bins that hold around 900lbs, or emptied into smaller cardboard cartons that weigh roughly 38lbs. Those bins arrive at the orchard and are filled on trailers, which are then driven up to the barn and unloaded. The bins are then loaded onto trucks or trailers, or in some cases the citrus is dumped straight into customers’ own containers.

The bulk of Justice Brothers grapefruit, their largest crop, is shipped via flatbed trailer to organic packing houses and sold under the label of those packing houses, ultimately winding up in supermarkets. The rest of the fruit is sold to several farmer’s market vendors, including Crooked Sky Farms, T&J Fresh and Local Farms, Blue Sky Organic Farms, and other small vendors across the state. They also sell to a brewery and a meadery in neighboring Avondale, a small organic lemonade company.

In the last few years the Justices began selling their citrus directly to customers when they opened Justice Brothers U-Pick on what was formerly known as the University of Arizona Maricopa County Citrus Experiment Station.

This farm produces a huge list of 75 varieties of fruit including several varieties of:

- mandarin
- tangerine
- tangelos
- sweet, navel, blood, valencia and sour oranges
- lemons
- limes
- grapefruit
- pomelo (and grapefruit pomelo hybrids!)
- kumquats, limequats and mandarinquats
- and roughly a dozen rootstock trees.

They've also just opened an on-farm produce stand, selling produce from neighboring farms alongside their own fruit and honey.

What does Selwyn like about growing citrus? "Getting paid is nice, but no one gets into farming to get rich. From my dad's perspective, having access to the best fruit, from the first of the season to the fruit that has ripened to the point that your teeth ache eating them, is wonderful. Personally, just being in the orchards during the picking season is phenomenal. The smell of ripening fruit, the mild humidity and warmth of the canopy in the winter months, climbing to the top of a picking ladder and looking out over the tops of trees burdened with the harvest; it makes for some pretty great moments."

