PEACH

FROM THE FRONT PAGE

to meet their needs.

"I am trying to learn as much from the growers as I can. I want to know what they are doing and, after all, they know more about the peach industry in Georgia than anyone else," Chavez said. "Experience is the best knowledge."

A member of a fourth-generation Ecuadorian farm family, Chavez learned a lot about raising dairy cows and beef cattle and growing potatoes by watching and listening to his father and grandfather.

So far, Chavez says Georgia peach growers seem to have the same concerns that all farmers have.

"They want to reduce their costs and increase their profit margins," he said. "They also want to know how to keep the peach trees alive and producing bigger."

For now, Chavez is applying for grants to fund peach research projects and installing 60 varieties of peach trees on the UGA Griffin Campus' Dempsey Farm — located just past U.S. Highway 19/41 off Georgia Highway 16 East.

Chavez is also developing a relationship with the Georgia Peach Council and the Georgia Peach Commission and creating a website and blog to share information with farmers and the public.

To help guide Georgia peach farmers, Chavez is working with the UGA Peach Team, which includes UGA plant pathologists, entomologists, horticulturists and USDA stone-fruit brokers.

"Weather in the Southeast is not very friendly to peaches. Growers fight a lot of insects and diseases," he said. "And, in the winter, they worry about peach blossoms freezing and their entire crop being damaged as a result."

Chavez earned an undergraduate degree in agricultural science and production from Zamorano University. He had no idea when he took an internship with the UGA College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences' Distance Diagnostics through Digital Imaging Laboratory in 2005 that he would one day be working as the college's peach expert. Chavez helped the DDIT system develop a Spanish manual for its partnership in Central America.

He left Georgia for Ohio State University, where he studied the interaction between soil microbes and plants. His internship there was cut short when he was accepted into the master's program at the University of Florida.

Chavez earned a master's degree in plant breeding and genetics in the blueberry breeding program under the direction of Paul Lyrene from UF. He continued studying at UF and also earned a Ph.D. in plant breeding and genetics in the stone fruit breeding and genetics program under the direction of Jose Chaparro. When the peach research and Extension position at UGA became available, Chavez was well prepared for the position and quickly applied.

Unlike Georgia's 11,000 acres, Florida has about 3,000 acres devoted to peaches.

"Peaches are more of a specialty crop there," he said. "There are a few growers with less than 300 acres, and the fruit they grow is different." The difference between Georgia peaches and Florida peaches includes the types and ways they are marketed.

"Georgia peaches are usually milled peaches — the peach breaks away from the stone, Florida peaches aren't. They are clingstones," he said.

According to the 2012 Farm Gate Value Report, peaches grown in Georgia generated a farm gate value of $333.6 million. Macon County produced the most peaches with 2,352 acres, followed by Peach County with 2,371 acres. Peaches are the second most popular fruit grown in Georgia behind blueberries.