Sixty years ago, Victor Guzman came to the fertile muck fields of western Palm Beach County with a clear but broad mission. Then a new assistant horticulturist assigned to the Everglades Research and Education Center at Belle Glade, he was directed to find ways to help Glades vegetable growers, however he could.

It mattered little to his boss whether Guzman’s help came in the form of plant breeding, weed and pest control, or fertility. Guzman took to the job like a gator to the swamp. Right away, he knew he was home, and he jumped to the task with a zeal bordering on obsession.

“The big boss, the dean of research, said to me, ‘Go solve problems.’ So, whatever problem they had, I had to take it on,” Guzman recalls.

Now 97 years old, he’s still at it, still at work most days, breeding new lettuce varieties and figuring ways to help growers solve problems. He officially retired in 1987, but couldn’t leave his work. His job was more than a job — it was a mission, and missions don’t stop with the turn of a calendar page.

“My mission changed on paper,” he says, “but the essence is still the same as it was in the beginning. If you want to work with vegetables and if you want to have a challenge, this is the place to be. I’m not specialized; I don’t know a lot about anything in particular. I like to be a generalist.”

Looking back at Guzman’s life, he didn’t seem destined to work with vegetables. Potatoes, maybe. He grew up in Peru, which is known for its potatoes. His father, a merchant who owned three farms operated by tenants, died when Guzman was three years old, turning his mother into a farm owner. Guzman’s weekend visits to the farms helped develop his interest in the science behind agriculture.

“That was 80 years or more ago,” he says. “I remember a year when potato blight hit Peru. They didn’t know how to control it. It was the same disease that is famous for destroying potatoes in Ireland, but nobody in Peru knew how to control it. It was the same disease that is famous for destroying potatoes in Ireland, but nobody in Peru knew how to control it. It was the same disease that is famous for destroying potatoes in Ireland, but nobody in Peru knew how to control it.

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The young Guzman wondered what could have caused the disease. Weather conditions? Fungi? Some other mysterious thing?

“The potato originated in the mountains of Peru and Bolivia. South American people love potatoes. I still do — I could eat them every day. When something that big happens to potatoes there, especially at that time, it’s a huge problem.”

A few years later, he studied agriculture in Lima, Peru’s capital city. After graduating in 1940, he studied horticulture at the University of Florida, earning a master’s degree in 1943. His Ph.D. in vegetable crops came in 1945 from Cornell University.

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“In 2009, Guzman gave $100,000 to endow the Lake Okeechobee Muck Rat Nation Scholarship Fund for the Palm Beach Community College Foundation. It allows two students per semester to attend the local community college.

His inspiration was a newspaper article about problems facing young African-American males in Belle Glade: low high school graduation rates, coupled with high rates of imprisonment and bleak job prospects.

At the time, he called the gift, “Only a drop of water in a vast ocean of need, but it is my wish that it will become a vast river of hope.”

During his years of working, he put a little money aside from each paycheck, planning to eventually do something meaningful for the area.

These days, Guzman spends much of his time working on lettuce nutrition issues and developing new lettuce varieties. He enjoys showing the occasional visitor around his greenhouse, explaining how he does it, hoping to find one winner amid thousands of cultivars — if he’s lucky.

When he came to the Glades, almost no lettuce was grown here, and the lettuce one farmer stubbornly tried growing year-after-year failed every time.

“There was an entomologist, Tom Carpenter, originally from Wisconsin, who worked for Billy Rogers and Mutt Thomas at South Bay Growers. Billy Rogers would plant 10 acres of lettuce year after year and not harvest anything. The market for lettuce was poor or non-existent.

“Dr. Carpenter took a vacation back in Wisconsin and visited a farmer named Herald Gatze, who was on a little piece of muck land and was dedicated to lettuce. He talked to Gatze about coming to Belle Glade to try growing lettuce, and Gatze sent his two sons here to do it. They brought their equipment and grew romaine and head lettuce in early spring and early fall because lettuce dislikes hot weather.”

The Gatzkes’ lettuce experiment worked. They hung around the Glades a few years in the early 1960’s, Guzman says, farming both in Florida and Wisconsin.

“They learned from them. They brought huge machines here that made beds, put down fertilizer and planted, all at the same time. The Gatzkes invented a lettuce seed planter that was new to us.

“At the station, we were not exactly working in that area at that time. The main crops farmers grew here were things like celery, corn, radishes and green beans, and we worked on whatever problems they had. But, the Gatzkes showed us how to do something new. The elder Gatze was very progressive and he figured out lots of things.”

Though the Gatzkes left the Glades, Guzman’s interest in lettuce continued to grow, and he worked on breeding superior varieties tailored to Glades conditions.
We have lots of diseases here that affect lettuce," he says. "Our climate is so variable, it’s not suitable for producing lettuce all the time. Lettuce loves cool nights and warm days, and we don’t always have that.

"We have a challenge competing with California lettuce; in general, California’s climate is much better for lettuce. So, we had to work a lot to get varieties that would grow well here. Now, we produce lettuce that is as good as grows anywhere — we have better varieties and farmers have learned the right way to do it."

A GLADES-AREA LETTUCE GROWERS GROUP funds much of Guzman’s breeding work now. "Sometimes we succeed and sometimes we don’t, but we keep trying. I have a greenhouse full of plants we’re evaluating. Some farmers grow my lettuce. Some don’t. I never tell them what to grow; it’s up to them. I show them what the lettuce is, then it’s their decision."

"The lettuce industry here is pretty good sized. The only vegetable crop that surpasses it in the Glades is sweet corn. The farmers give me the help I need."

TKM Farms is one of the area’s biggest lettuce growers. Steve Basore, a partner in the company with his brothers, says Guzman is key to the industry’s success. "We owe an awful lot to Dr. Guzman’s research," Basore says. "We have a lot of admiration for him. It’s pretty amazing that he’s still at it."

Rick Roth, whose Roth Farms produces lettuce, among other crops, agrees that Guzman’s vision and drive have been vital to the business. "To me, it’s that he’s been steady, that he understands what we need, and he’s always looking for ways to find it. He’s constantly looking at things to explore, working to find the right answers."

"He has a strong work ethic — he’s pushing the envelope all the time," Roth says. "He has a real passion for it. I have a feeling he’d rather be in the field on a farm than at the station. That’s the kind of guy he is. That’s why he’s been successful."

Guzman is a bit amused by how surprised people are that he’s still working 25 years after his official retirement. "I’m working for farmers. I came back for the farmers. I felt they need me. And they want me. So why not? What else am I going to do with my time?"

Not long after coming to the Glades, Guzman began hearing speculation about what would happen to the area after the rich muck soil oxidized and disappeared. In the 1920s, fields had muck 16 feet thick; now most fields have 3 feet or less.

"Heavy machinery compacts it, microorganisms eat it. It’s a good media for organisms to grow in. There are places here now with a half-foot of muck. That’s going to produce lots of problems. Controlling water properly is harder. The use of machinery gets difficult. Drainage gets difficult," he says.

MANY PEOPLE THINK GLADES agriculture will die as the muck recedes, but Guzman isn’t so sure of that.

His pet project these days is working with cherimoya, a tree that produces fruit with a creamy white flesh that tastes like a blend of banana, pineapple, papaya and strawberry. It is grown in Asia and South and Central America.

"The glabra will grow in water and produce fruit," Guzman says. "If we could use it to graft the cherimoya, which has very sweet fruit, we would have a fruit tree that could grow in water."

When the muck disappears from a field, it might be possible to grow the grafted cherimoya trees in the underlying rock, then flood fields, turning the trees into a fruit crop like oranges or apples.

"The cherimoya fruit is hard and sweet, isn’t easy to bruise, and it can be sent to just about any market," Guzman says. "Scientifically speaking, we can produce a crop in rock. The glabra and cherimoya have potential. I’m just working on it in my spare time; I have no money for this project. Maybe it’s just an old man talking, but I think it might work."