

Peach Industry One Horticulture Conference Topic

Calif. Dominates Southeast, Mid-Atlantic Peach Market

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Association of Pennsylvania. The association held its meeting concurrent with the Pennsylvania Vegetable Conference and Trade Show.

Where South Carolina used to ship 100 loads of peaches to national markets in a day, last year there weren't 200 loads in any given week, noted Walker. Based on USDA statistics, California shipped 68 percent of the total fresh market peaches in 1997 compared to only 10 percent for South Carolina, nine percent from Georgia, five percent from New Jersey, and eight percent from other states.

California's peak shipping week ended July 19 when it shipped 1,023 loads. From June 14 to Aug. 9, California shipped more than 700 loads each week. During the period, California growers shipped 7,915 loads.

To compare, the "Appalachian Area," designated by USDA as Maryland, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and West Virginia, shipped 118 loads the week ending Sept. 6.

Walker spoke about the overall health of the southeastern peach industry.

"It's not healthy," he said. "Where it's going will depend on the weather."

For the past several years, growers have been hit hard by late frosts cutting into the yield and quality of peaches.

Although there were some frost-induced failures in 1997, growers still harvested a modest crop.

In 1983, South Carolina was hit by a frost and only harvested about 95 million pounds. The past season, producers harvested about 160 million pounds on 16,000 acres.

The number of acres has dropped significantly in a decade, from 40,000 acres in the mid 1980s. And the packing houses have gone out of business — 21 in the last 15 years. Today Georgia has eight packing houses and 11 remain in South Carolina.

Stores are demanding product for consumers that has more consistent color, measures a consistent 2½ inches in size, has good overall shape, with fruit that is cold hardy, has good flavor, contains no bacterial spotting, is more round, contains a small suture, and other factors.

For South Carolina, April can have some treacherous growing nights, when freezes can repeat a



Dr. Joseph Goffreda, associate professor and director of Rutgers Fruit Research and Extension Center at Cream Ridge, N.J., spoke about the history of white peach varieties and how they are being grown and sold today.

few times in a row, damaging crops.

Because of chilling, one grower told Walker that the "first of season" fruit market is no longer there. Now, the normal five- to six-week window stretches to 6-8 weeks and beyond. And growers aren't getting \$18-\$25 for the first box of fruit like they used to, Walker noted. There is no difference anymore between the first and last box.

More and more retailers are demanding that fruit be supplied in 25-pound boxes (38-pounds for the undersize or culled material). The 25-pound boxes are considered half a bushel.

Retailers are pushing hard for price look-up (PLU) stickers, which make some producers cringe because of the increased labor in applying the stickers.

The National Peach Council (NPC) works hard for the industry to lobby for issues important to growers. In 1997, NPC, accompanied by peach growers from six different states, made three trips to Washington to lobby officials. Issues debated were purchases of fresh frozen freestone peaches, changes in crop insurance for producers, peach research funding, methyl bromide and the Clean Air Act, Guest Worker Program, Mexican quarantine of U.S. peaches, and Legal Services Corporation.

"We're developing a little bit of traction and impact in Washington," Walker said.

The council numbers 426 and is seeking 1,000 members by 2002. However, it needs members from Mid-Atlantic states to continue programs vital to the industry. To become a member, contact NPC at 12 Nicklaus Lane, Suite 101, Columbia, SC 29229, (803) 788-7101.

Peach Panel

At a producer panel later that day at the state horticulture meeting, noted growers reflected some of the frustration felt by the impact of California peaches on markets in the East.

John Lott, president of Bear Mountain Orchards in Aspers, grows more than 600 acres of fruit in Adams County. He mentioned how aware growers are of the "20 million boxes of fruit" marketed by California growers.

"California will continue to

exhibit a constant presence," said Lott.

However, Lott noted that it shouldn't be so.

"We're an overnight drive to 60 million people," he said.

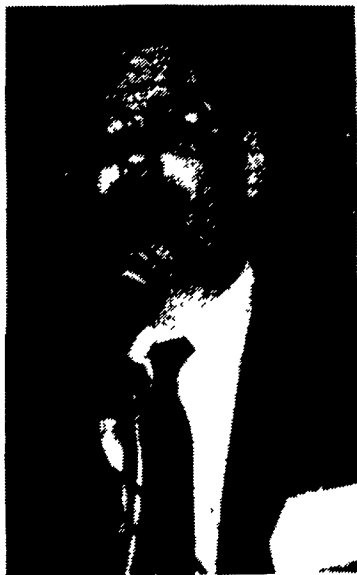
Growers in the East, including the Mid-Atlantic states, have the population density — and the consumers — necessary to buy quality peaches.

Lott noted that a large market for his business includes specialty stores. Many want a "tree-ripened, fuzzy peach," he said, with that "homegrown, farm look." He uses ½ bushel wooden crates and 38-pound containers for undersize peaches.

Retailers want that big, 100 percent red peach, he noted. Customers don't want poor interior condition for the peaches and off-flavors.

The business, Lott said, markets peaches for 25 different local growers. Fruit is placed into ½ bushel crates and cooled quickly and properly stored.

Lott noted that the correct temperatures to keep peaches are



Dr. Norm Lalancette, Rutgers Cooperative Extension fruit pathology specialist, noted that unlike brown rot, fire blight and phytophthora can kill entire trees.

between 31-32 degrees, not 45 degrees. "Forty-five degrees is the death of the peach," he said, causing browning and shriveling. If ripening is needed, the temperature should be 70 degrees. "It's important to maintain a cool chain throughout the distribution," said

Lott.

At the panel, one grower noted the importance of looking for alternative packing methods because cardboard absorbs moisture and leaves a shriveled, dry peach. Plastic-coated cardboard boxes used to work well but can't be recycled.

For the peach itself, consumers prefer flavor and cream coloring, which they often consider more important than size.

Another grower, Jack Bream, Ortanna, maintains 500 acres of apples and about 150 acres of peaches and nectarines.

Bream said, "I have a rule. Never ship a warm peach."

Bream indicated that he packs peaches measuring 2½ inches and greater and the "ups" in 25-pound boxes, to get premium prices for the boxes. The culls and smaller are packed in 38-pound boxes.

A key to success for growers would be getting the commitment from the buyers early enough in the season before the season starts. Getting growers "together to plan for this will firm up the local market," said Bream.

Buyers want a large, firm, red peach. It's important to "research new varieties to pick a winner," he said.

Another grower on the panel was Doug Zee, president of Zee Orchards in Glassboro, N.J. About two-thirds of his crop is packed in 25-pound and another one-third in 38-pound containers.

Zee noted that growers should consider the right materials and have "adequate packing supplies," he said.

It's important for growers to maximize profits. "You're not there to feed the world for free," he said.

Like Bream, Zee noted that it's important to cool the peaches down quickly, so he makes use of plastic bins, which cool faster than wood.

By improving thinning methods, despite last year's drought, the orchard was able to obtain fruit sizes of 2½ inches and larger.

Zee noted he was concerned about growers who pick too early, providing peaches to consumers that look like "limes." Many of those customers will simply walk away and never buy a peach again.



According to Charles Walker, managing director of the National Peach Council, Columbia, S.C., California will ship about 750-770 million pounds of peaches this season, nearly double the amount of a decade ago. Peaches will be hauled to store shelves in the Southeast and Mid-Atlantic, where traditionally seasonal crops in the heart of summer from local growers dominate displays.

Bill Heritage, general manager of Eastern Propak in Glassboro, N.J., spoke about the company's 100,000 square foot warehouse, providing two cold storage facilities. In season, the company packages nectarine and peaches for about 10 members in south Jersey. In the winter, they package imported fruits for markets.

Moderator for the panel was Jerry Frecon, ag agent with Rutgers Cooperative Extension in Gloucester County.

Marketing Crucial

For many growers, the managing director of the National Peach Council noted that marketing is essential.

"I like big ads, big displays, and hot (low retail) prices," said Charles Walker, who also spoke Wednesday afternoon at the horticulture meeting.

"If I can have all three of these, it's ideal," he said. "If not three, then two out of three."

By promoting peaches in huge

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Growers learned about the importance of nematode control in orchards to prevent disease by Dr. John Halbrendt, Penn State.



At a producer panel later that day at the state horticulture meeting, noted growers and agri-industry representatives reflected on some of the lessons they learned to grow a good peach. From left, panel moderator Jerry Frecon, ag agent with Rutgers Cooperative Extension in Gloucester County; Doug Zee, president of Zee Orchards in Glassboro, N.J.; Jack Bream, Ortanna; John Lott, president of Bear Mountain Orchards in Aspers; and Bill Heritage, general manager of Eastern Propak in Glassboro, N.J.