



Desmond R. Layne

Stone Fruit

Make The Right Decisions

THE *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines acumen as “keenness and depth of perception, discernment, or discrimination especially in practical matters.” This characteristic will be necessary for any grower to be successful in the 21st century. For stone fruit growers in particular, the ability to make wise decisions will make the difference between a profitable business and a failed one.

As a horticulturist, my recommendations to a particular grower are typically based on the finite knowledge I have of his situation or on the limited information he gives me. But, ultimately, each grower knows what he can or cannot afford to do. Some thoughts come to mind: buying or leasing land, site selection, supplemental irrigation (or not), rootstock, cultivar, pruning and training, thinning, fertilization, pest management, postharvest and marketing, and labor.

The economics dictating cost to the grower and the return he realizes will determine whether his stone fruit acreage is expanded or reduced. The increased cost of fuel, labor, fertilizer, pesticides, etc., will require that the return at the market gate or chain store increase proportionally. Will the average customer be willing to pay \$1.99 per pound or more for ripe, juicy, delicious stone fruits? I believe that he will — provided that the fruit is ripe, juicy, and delicious.

Changing Tastes

When I was a young boy, I fondly remember my grandparents visiting us in August each year. This was due, in part, to the fact that it was summer vacation for the grandchildren but also because it was the height of the peach season in southern Ontario. One highlight of their trip was going to the peach orchard with our family and picking tree-ripe fruit. I can still remember seeing the expression on their faces and hearing their exclamations of joy as they feasted on delicious fruit with juice dripping off their elbows. “Fabulous!” “Terrific!” “Delicious!” are just a few adjectives I remember. Oh, that this could be the expression of all stone fruit consumers around the country when they bring fruit home from the chain store! Sadly, it is often not the case.

I don’t have a crystal ball, but given the increasing affluence of our society and the time-limited lifestyle of many in my generation, the average stone fruit “consumer” is changing. The days of folks buying peaches by the bushel and “putting them up” seems to be disappearing. However, buying a peck of beautiful, fragrant, juicy, and delicious fruit and not being concerned about the cost seems to be a growing trend. Repeat buying at the roadside market is common because the fruit is fresh and ripe and the consumer has someone to complain to if they are otherwise. However, repeat purchases at the big chain stores are less consistent. It is clear that serious education efforts should be aimed toward produce managers.

Quality Makes The Difference

So how will you practice acumen in your operation? Have you examined and tasted the fruit that comes off your farm at the point of sale? Would you eat it? Would you be willing to pay \$1.99 per pound for it? Would you be proud to have your label on it? Would you give it to a politician who you might solicit for funding to support academic research or disaster relief? I know that these questions may seem a bit flippant but I am quite serious.



Photo courtesy of Desmond Layne

Even at a young age, consumers can learn how to distinguish high-quality peaches when they taste them, as Desmond Layne demonstrates above.

Quality is going to be the name of the game in the future. Are you willing to more aggressively cull inferior fruit or remove a block of trees of a variety that you now know was a mistake to plant? The consumer may be duped one time by flashy gimmicks to buy stone fruit that may look good. But when they get them home and after one bite toss them into the trash, how has the promotional program resulted in repeat customers? The old proverb, “fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me” is worthy of consideration. I think some stone fruit growers need to take a deep, careful look in the mirror.

With all due respect to the many friends I have in the industry, I know we can do better. One elite grower friend of mine has voiced the same opinion. Perhaps we need to reduce our acreage and focus on quality. Maybe we should target markets closer to home so that fruit will arrive fresh. The status quo is not good enough. What changes do you need to make in your operation to ensure your long-term viability, profitability, and customer satisfaction? ●

Desmond R. Layne, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor of Pomology and Tree Fruit Specialist in the Department of Horticulture at Clemson University in South Carolina. E-mail questions or comments about this article to dlayne@clemson.edu, or go to www.clemson.edu/hort/Peach/index.php.