



Stone Fruit

A Fruitful Education

Desmond R. Layne

BY THE time you receive this next column, I will already have begun meeting twice a week to teach 33 undergraduate and graduate students in my class, "Just Fruits," at Clemson University. Each Tuesday and Thursday, we will meet to talk about temperate tree and small fruit crops and their origin and history of cultivation, folklore, medicinal properties and nonfood use, botany and taxonomy, production, general culture, pest management, harvest and postharvest handling, and use in the human diet. It is a fun and exciting time for me to impart to these still impressionable students a love and passion for fruit and to introduce them to the amazing field of pomology (fruit science).

For those of you who grow fruit for a living or for passion, you probably find it remarkable how ignorant most people are about where their food comes from, in general, and how little they know about fruit, in particular.

I had a phone call from an individual in California last month who said, "Dr. Layne, why do peaches have fuzz?" Struck by the simplicity of the question, my answer was equally simple, "because God made them that way!" The unsatisfied caller pursued further and we talked about what a trichome was and the benefits it afforded a fuzzy peach versus a fuzzless nectarine, and we had a fun "teachable moment" together.

Earlier this summer, I had a call from an individual in Montreal who had just taken his niece to see the new movie "Kung Fu Panda." Apparently there is a scene in the movie where a child is near a blooming peach tree. The caller wanted to know where he could drive to take his niece so that they could take a photo next to a blooming peach tree. When I received the call, I was actually in a peach orchard evaluating

some new selections. Sadly, I had to inform him that even in peach orchards nearest to him in Ontario, the flowers were long gone and baby peaches were already growing.

As I greet the sleepy eyes of college students who were up too late the night before, the answer to the question "where do peaches come from?" that I am not looking for is "a can." In many land grant universities across the U.S., production related courses in fruit crops have become less popular



At the Musser Fruit Research Farm Field Day on July 15, tasting was believing, as attendees were able to try several new peach selections.

Photo courtesy of Craig Mahaffey

to students. Also, there are fewer and fewer qualified people to teach such courses. In departments that once had several pomologists, there may now be only one or none at all. Where formerly there were several fruit courses offered, today there may only be one "diluted" course that simply scratches the surface of what may have been taught 10 to 20 years ago.

Changing Courses

Is pomological science something that is dying and nearly dead and should no longer be part of a horticulture degree? I think not! So what is the remedy? Students (and the public at large) need to be taught that fresh fruits are a vital part of the human diet and that they provide nutritional and health benefits that exceed what they can get from drinks, supplements, or fruit roll-ups. Further, they can be delicious to

eat and a genuine source of pleasure. What? Yes, pleasure! Many times I have looked into the eyes of a person who has had their first taste of a tree-ripened peach. With juice dripping off their chin and elbows, the smile and gleaming eyes express what true pleasure is.

One way that I have sought to reach out to these "Generation Y" or "Millennial" (people born roughly between 1980-1994) students is to make fruit tasting a part of each class. At the halfway point of each lecture period, we take 10 to 15 minutes to taste fresh fruits of the crop being studied. If fresh fruit is unavailable, we taste processed or dried products, juice, etc. The goal is not only to give them a snack and keep them awake but to expand their mind to the different flavors, shapes, colors, and health benefits of many things they have never tried before beyond an apple or banana. As we partake of some perfect and not-so-perfect fruits, we can talk about the difference between "tree-ripened" and "shipped from far away" and the concepts of global marketing versus locally produced. The students love this part of the class.

How about you? It is unlikely that you are teaching a college pomology class, but what are you doing to contribute to pomological education? Do you offer children's tours at your farm? Do you invite the news media to participate in educational events at your farm? When was the last time you wrote a letter to the editor of your local newspaper or talked with your local politicians about our vital food supply and the issues facing the fruit industry? How can you make a difference in educating the public about the fascinating and wonderful world of fruit? ●

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