

COMPETING IN A GLOBAL MARKETPLACE

## Why nectarines are the next big thing



Ontario's tender fruit industry has been systematically executing its business plan since 2013, installing modern packing lines and building more cold storage. That's not an easy task with limited resources and so many moving parts in the value chain. In response to retailer demand, one of the objectives is to shift from peaches to more nectarines. George Lepp is one of the growers who is marshalling the cooperative efforts near Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario. Photos by Glenn Lowson.

KAREN DAVIDSON

Niagara-on-the-Lake, ON – Nectarines, the fuzzless peach, used to occupy a narrow slice of tender fruit offerings in Ontario. That slice is becoming more of a wedge in the pie chart.

The firm, red-skinned fruit is starting to take away acreage from peaches, now accounting for 14 per cent of tender fruit volumes. That's up from 10 per cent in 2015. With encouragement from California's trends, growers are sensing that nectarines could represent a more

diversified market that can be delivered for a longer period than the last two weeks of August.

"Retailers want consistent volumes over a longer time period and they want a highly-coloured strain," explains George Lepp, a major fruit

grower near Niagara-on-the-Lake.

Mike Mauti agrees. A long-time produce buyer for Loblaw and more recently head of Execulytics Consulting, Mauti says retailers have been importing more nectarines than peaches for several years now.

Why? Consumers are picky about the mouthfeel of peach fuzz. Another reason is that consumers love big fruit. In recent years, global stone fruit growers have developed techniques to grow larger nectarine varieties that rival the size of peaches.

But there's more to the story. "Many people will hold the opinion that there is nothing quite like an Ontario peach, not a New Jersey peach, not a Georgia peach and not a California peach," says Mauti. "But fewer people would say the same thing of an Ontario nectarine. There was a time during Ontario peach season, all stone fruit imports would be cut off.

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## COVER STORY

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“Retailers want consistent volumes over a longer time period and they want a highly-coloured strain.

~ GEORGE LEPP

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“As customer tastes have changed to be more in favour of nectarines, imported nectarines became more and more prevalent in Ontario grocery stores during the local season. The Ontario tender fruit industry has a huge risk of losing more stone fruit business to the United States if they do not grow nectarines that rival the imports.”

Ontario’s 200-plus tender fruit growers have taken heed. However, nectarines are not easier to grow than peaches. In fact, mechanical thinning is impossible. The fruit is more sensitive to frost. Bacterial spot and insects such as aphids are culprits in causing blemishes.

Despite these challenges, growers are planting more acreage to nectarines with 742 mapped acres. Almost half of this growth—up 132 acres from 2014 — is thanks to a revitalization grant from the Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation received in 2016/2017. Lepp, for one, has devoted 35 per cent of his tender fruit trees to nectarines. It’s a small but promising segment, so members of the Vineland Growers’ Cooperative

formed a separate entity, the Canadian Fruit Tree Nursery in 2016 to better develop the new varieties that retailers are requesting. The first products of this venture will be available in 2018.

“Commercial nurseries are a number of steps away from the marketplace,” says Lepp. “Growers want to take destiny into their own hands. We know what buyers are looking for.”

Shelf life of five to seven days is important. Tender fruit growers are achieving that goal with the ability to move fruit from the tree to the packing house and the retailer within 36 hours. Then comes the promise of a memorable consumer eating experience. Vineland Research and Innovation Centre (Vineland), also located in the Niagara peninsula, has a sensory evaluation panel that can provide feedback on whether new varieties are hitting the mark.

One of the hurdles has been gaining access to virus-free stock from sources outside Canada. The Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) requires that any new germplasm is quarantined in their laboratory in Sidney, British Columbia for up to three

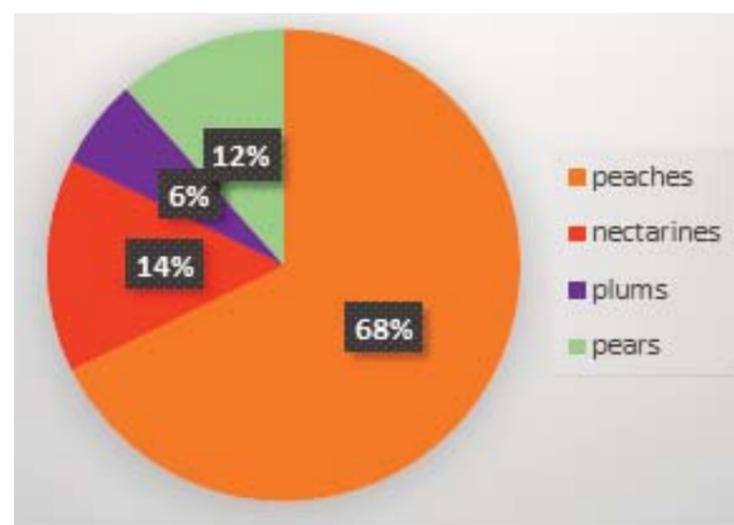
years. It takes that long to confirm the material is virus-free and to release clean budwood for propagation.

Rapid virus indexing could be a game-changer. CFIA has developed the new protocol using next-generation DNA sequencing. As of February 2017, researcher Mike Rott in the Sidney BC laboratory and Travis Banks, a research scientist, bioinformatics with Vineland, are working to validate the technique.

“Good science is about replication,” explains Banks. “If the technique works, then the quarantine time will be cut from years to months.”

Vineland’s research is funded by the Ontario Tender Fruit Growers, Niagara Peninsula Fruit and Vegetable Growers’ Association and the Apple Working Group of the Canadian Horticultural Council and Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada’s Canadian Agricultural Adaptation Program. British Columbia’s work is funded by Summerland Varieties Corporation, Genome BC and the BC Cherry Growers. Testing results are expected in March 2018. The following year, it’s expected that CFIA will evaluate how the technique

Ontario Tender Fruit 2016 Volume (Tons)



This numbered nectarine variety is one of several being evaluated by Ontario’s tender fruit industry.

can be replicated and lowered in cost so that growers can monitor their own mother blocks.

“This is not a tool just for CFIA, but for growers and third-party entities,” says Banks.

Growers such as Lepp are encouraged.

“We need to access world-wide knowledge and be resourceful in putting that knowledge to work in our own

local industry,” says Lepp. “Our costs are escalating as we speak.”

The goal is to increase nectarine’s contributions to the tender fruit mix to 30 per cent of farmgate receipts by 2021.

This season’s most prominent variety is Fantasia. It’s not fantasy to think it will be the harbinger of even more success to come.

## INTERNATIONAL

## CHINA

### Fruit Logistica expands to Shanghai



Fruit Logistica, well-known for its show in Berlin, is extending its brand to China. From May 14 to 16, 2018, a new national trade show will be hosted in Shanghai.

“The millions and millions of consumers, spread all over China, are making higher demands for freshness, taste and quality,” says Willfried Wollbold, Fruit Logistica’s global brand manager. “Fruit Logistica has built the first trade platform for the fresh produce industry, including online and routine channels, that covers the entire country.”

Most visitors and exhibitors are expected from China, including retailers, distributors, online marketers, importers and exporters.

Source: FreshPlaza.com

## UNITED STATES

### Top berry-loving cities identified

One of the best-known berry growers in the United States, Driscoll’s, has revealed the top berry-loving cities. Boston, Hartford-New Haven and Minneapolis-St Paul take the top three slots, confirmed with data from The Nielsen Company and weekly stores sales.

The data shows that the Twin Cities is the raspberry consumption capital of the U.S. Other top markets include: Cincinnati, Philadelphia, Buffalo/Rochester, Denver, and New York City. Together, citizens of these cities consume nearly 400 million pounds of fresh berries or more than 25 per cent of the country’s total berry consumption.

Source: FreshPlaza.com

## WASHINGTON STATE

### New pears showcased

Several new pears are coming to the global market, providing more momentum to the category which has grown from 15 million tonnes in 2002 to 26 million tonnes in 2014. The Piqa Boo brand was one variety showcased at Interpera, an international pear conference in Wenatchee, Washington.

A New Zealand company, Holman Fresh, is behind the pear that combines characteristics from European, Japanese and Chinese pears. It offers a crisp, juicy texture and refreshing flavour as well as long-term storage attributes.

Other varieties include: Celina, Carmen and Selena from Spain; Angelys from France; Sweet Sensation, Xenia, Cepuna and Corina from the Netherlands and Belgium; Gem from the U.S.

China leads in pear production and boasts consumption of 9.26 kg per person annually.

Source: FreshPlaza.com

