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Eastern Fresh Growers increasing asparagus acreage due to strong market

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“Our asparagus acreage is up this year,” Tom Sheppard, president of Eastern Fresh Growers Inc., in Cedarville, NJ, told *The Produce News*. “The market is strong and prices are up. Some of the increase in demand could be related to nutrition, but another contributing factor is that other areas of the country have reduced acreage due to either weather issues or their asparagus acreage is in off-production status.”

The company is backing its strong growth in asparagus production and sales with a new high-graphic box that was designed by Sheppard’s daughter, Margaret Sheppard, who works in advertising. She is also designing pepper, cucumber and place pack pepper boxes for what Sheppard said was “for dear old dad.”

Sheppard explained that asparagus is a perennial, but the crop lasts only so many years. Growers then must transition that land to other crops.

“Basically you cannot replant asparagus in the same soil for some time,” he said. “However, that land is ideal for growing a different crop because of all of the organic material that remains from the asparagus’ roots, which makes for a good cycle.”



Margaret Sheppard proudly displaying the new asparagus box she designed for her dad's company, Eastern Fresh Growers. "In our case, we have a lot of acreage that we have never grown asparagus on, which enabled us to increase our production," Sheppard continued. "Our existing fields have been harvesting for numerous years, but they continue to yield great quality product with strong volumes. When you have a good market you stick with it as long as possible."

Sheppard also noted that the New Jersey asparagus production period is in a different time frame with that produced in Mexico and Peru, and so competition is not an issue.

Eastern Fresh Growers is in its fourth year in its new 28,125-square-foot packing facility. The building has an 8,375-square foot mezzanine, a 2,000-square-foot employee break room, 2,000 square feet of office space and a 1,650-square-foot utility area. The packing area is temperature controlled and the product and employee flow is optimized for food safety.

"The building is a larger version of our packing house that we built about seven years ago," said Sheppard. "We were very satisfied with its design, and so we used the same basic footprint in the new building. It is used for cucumbers and it is equipped with an electronic pepper line. It is fully refrigerated to provide an unbroken cold chain in a sealed and insulated environment."

But Eastern Fresh doesn't rest on its laurels for long. Instead, it constantly looks at ways to improve its facility to help increase and improve what its customers receive.

"My son and nephew recently went to California to see a new type of asparagus sizing equipment that we're told does a better job sizing than can be done by eye," said Sheppard. "We like to see for ourselves rather than rely on someone's opinion, so they went out to watch the machine in action and talk to the guys running it. We're considering the investment now."

Eastern Fresh Growers is a multi-generational family farming operation that was started in the late 1600s. It has a long history selling for Jersey Legacy Farms, and this year the company will also do its packing. It also sells for Laning Bros. Farms, Sorbello & Wheeler Farms, Hensel Farms and it markets its own acreage. It also works with North Carolina growers for lettuce destined for processing. Grower-partners there include Tull Hill Farms, Premier Produce and Fresh Pik Produce.

“We will also be selling for a couple of additional farms this year,” Sheppard noted. “They are Coleman Farms in Elmer and Heiken Farms in Auburn.”

The company also handles organic produce for Sheppard’s brother, David Sheppard, and David’s daughter, Michele.

“We are able to handle the organic produce in the same packing house where we handle the asparagus, but the seasons are separate and so we just go in and replace all of the equipment to maintain the organic status,” said Sheppard. “The demand for organics continues, but you have to be careful to not over produce it, which can result in price resistance.”

Eastern Fresh sells a lot of leaf items to bagging companies, which have rigid food-safety requirements.

“We have GAP’s Harmonized Food Safety Standard and PrimusGFS certification, so we are well ahead of what companies today demand,” said Sheppard. “Every year there are more hurdles related to food safety and traceability, but we’re always on top of our game.”

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