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## **Eastern Fresh Growers meeting growing demand for asparagus**

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Eastern Fresh Growers Inc., in Cedarville, NJ, is making major strides in its production and handling of locally grown asparagus.

Tom Sheppard, company president, told *The Produce News* the company has increased its asparagus production to 350 acres, as compared to about 100 acres a few years ago.

“Asparagus plants have a lifespan of 16 or 17 years,” explained Sheppard. “We’re still producing original acreage, but we’re also planting new varieties with different characteristics.”

Rutgers University, Sheppard explained, has been ahead of the curve in the development of new asparagus varieties for decades.

New varieties offer benefits such as more production per acre.



Fran Hancock, sales representative for Eastern Fresh

Growers, in front of the new Straus asparagus packing line. Hancock headed up the machine project. Sheppard noted that asparagus prices are strong today. The program has grown significantly, causing the company to move the packing line into its large 28,125-square-foot high-tech facility that was completed six years ago.

“We have installed new machinery to automatically size the item,” said Sheppard. “The machines, manufactured in Germany, cut the asparagus to the proper length and then send it to specific shoots. We then adjust the packing, such as our microwavable offerings, label it and prepare it for shipment.”

Sheppard explained that New Jersey’s movement started a little late this year, but it hit its stride quickly.

“We’re starting lettuces by Memorial Day weekend, which is just a few days behind schedule,” he said. “But the Carolinas ran a little late, so we don’t expect an overlap or glut.”

“The Salinas area of California is reporting some problems with asparagus and leaf production this year, and prices are high,” Sheppard continued. “Leaf items from that region have been running in the \$30 range, as compared to normal \$14.”

While he isn’t certain, he attributes the shortage to a combination of the drought, causing some growers to cut back on production, and the high cost of transportation to the east.

Eastern Fresh’s primary grower is Sheppard Farms, which is owned by Sheppard and his brother, Erwin Sheppard. Eastern Fresh handles its packaging and marketing.

Eastern Fresh also packs and markets for Jersey Legacy Farms in Cedarville, which produces only organic produce. It is owned by Sheppard’s brother, David Sheppard.

Jersey Legacy produces a full line of wet and dry organic produce and has started producing sweet corn.

Eastern Fresh also sells for Laning Brother Farms, Sorbello Farms and Hensel Farms. It also works with Tull Hill Farms, and Fresh Pik Produce in North Carolina for lettuce destined for processing.

Situations such as the drought in the West, while unfortunate, are almost second nature to growers.

Regardless of where a farm is located it is subject to Mother Nature’s changes.

“You don’t find more optimistic people than farmers,” said Sheppard.

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“They’re putting millions of dollars into the earth, not knowing what is going to come along and wreak havoc on it before you can get it harvested,” he added.

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