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More fresh figs on tap for Western Fresh Marketing

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With an additional 20 acres of production coming on line in the California desert this year, Western Fresh Marketing, headquartered in Madera, CA, is expecting to have more fruit to sell this season.

President George Kragie told *The Produce News* on April 29 that the crop was a few days early and he would have some fruit for sale toward the end of the first week in May, but noted those supplies would be scarce and very expensive. In fact, he said that will be the case through much of May. “The market always starts out high at prices only a real fig lover will pay,” he quipped.

He expects his volume to increase through May and June as he sources from the desert first and then rolls into Kern and Madera counties in early June. “We are going to pick a few boxes on May 2 and 3 for GlobalGAP and then get started a few days later,” he said in late April.

With production from both the desert and the Central Valley through much of summer and fall, Western Fresh Marketing will be offering its customers a wide range of California figs from May through December.

The company also imports figs from Chile during the January to May timeframe but Kragie said “we try to get out of that market before California starts. We’re all about buying California.”

Like the other fig producers, Western Fresh offers a number of varieties, including the first-of-the-season Breda crop, which is actually produced on the tree’s budwood from the previous year. “We have very sophisticated buyers who we keep well posted on the various varieties and their timing,” he said.

Besides the increased acreage, the newest wrinkle at Western Fresh will be the addition of a value-priced half-carton this year. When promotable volume is the order of the day — probably in July and August — the firm is going to offer a half-carton for value pricing at retail. But Kragie said the majority of sales will be in clamshells, typically eight to 12 ounces and holding different counts of figs depending upon the size of the fruit.

When reached in late April, Kragie and his wife, Susan Bidvia-Kragie, the firm's tropical manager, had just settled in for the summer in their Michigan home. The couple spends a bit more than half the year in Michigan and the rest of the time in California. Kragie, who admitted to turning 69 recently, said he remains active, and plans to continue to do so, largely because of figs. He called himself a fig enthusiast and said the item seems to be gaining in popularity every year. He likened it to broccoli and artichokes, two items that were once specialties and now are mainstream. He noted that the California Fig Advisory Board has done a great job getting publicity for figs on food shows as well as in food magazines and food sections in daily papers. The publicity, he said, has helped fig sales tremendously. "Figs have become sexy," he said.

He added that in recipes they can be utilized as either a savory or sweet flavor. "They are definitely becoming more mainstream."

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