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Homegrown Organics ramping up citrus production

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The citrus category is one of the major sectors for Porterville, CA-based Homegrown Organic Farms. As such, it is a solid growth crop for the San Joaquin Valley grower-packer-shipper

Craig Morris, grape and citrus category director for the company, explained the firm's philosophy to The Produce News in early January. "We have been strategic about planning growth to meet demand," he said. "We are adding acreage at the rate of about 10 percent per year and we are going to do that for years to come."

According to its website, Homegrown Organic Farms is part of a family of companies operating in many areas of the agricultural industry. "Together, we represent over 80 different growers with a total of more than 4,000 acres in organic farming. From fresh produce sales to farm management operations, we have a single mission to deliver the absolute best to your table."



The family-run operation committed to the organic method of growing more than 20 years ago and today exclusively markets organic products. Morris said the citrus category includes navels, lemons, Cara Cara navels, grapefruit, pomelos and clementines.

Speaking of this year's crop of citrus, Morris said perfect California growing conditions have produced excellent supplies of organic citrus across the board resulting in impressive yields and production increases above the acreage increase. "Overall, I believe we will have a 20 percent increase in many of our citrus varieties," he said. "The next 90 to 100 days (well into April) is the perfect time to promote our organic citrus. Across the board we will have peak production of all varieties."

He added that about 25 percent of the company's citrus production had been harvested and marketed by early January.

So far this citrus season, which began in the fall, the San Joaquin Valley has experienced perfect growing conditions with a nice array of intermittent storms and cold fronts bringing above average rainfall and the cold nighttime temperatures the citrus needs to extend the time it can spend on the tree. Unlike most tree fruit crops, citrus can hang on the tree throughout the season providing orderly marketing for many months.

The above average rainfall has helped size the fruit and continues to do so. "Currently, our packout is trending as we expected but these perfect growing conditions could result in 5 percent more fruit by the end of the year."

Morris noted that citrus is one of the more difficult crops to grow organically for a variety of reasons. Topping that list is the fact that organic growers cannot use synthetic nitrogen as an input. Nitrogen, of course, is an essential element in plant growth. While it naturally resides in the soil, conventional growers typically add synthetic nitrogen to give their crops the boost they need. Organic growers must add natural nitrogen, which is an expensive and difficult proposition. Another factor limiting the growth in production of organic citrus is HLB disease, which devastated Florida's citrus industry and requires substantial inputs to guard against it. Organic citrus growers simply have fewer crop protection tools at their disposal.

Nonetheless, Morris said the cadre of growing and marketing experts affiliated with Homegrown Organic Farms are using their expertise to make organic citrus financially viable and provide a vast array of varieties to their customers. "We have more than a dozen citrus varieties and can provide our customers with promotional opportunities throughout the season," he said, adding that there has been an uptick in the demand for bag opportunities in the organic citrus category.

Morris noted that despite the challenges there are more marketers entering the category. He said that is a testament to the growing demand for organics by consumers, and the excitement the category generates at the retail supermarket.

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