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Titan Farms occupies top spot in Southern peach arena

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With 6,000 acres of peaches, South Carolina's Titan Farms is the largest peach grower in the Southeast and is reportedly the second largest grower of that stone fruit category in the United States.

"I'm the first generation in my family in farming," said Chalmers Carr III, who, along with his wife and business partner Lori Anne, owns and operates Titan Farms, which also farms 1,600 acres of vegetables. "People say, 'I have the content, she has the polish.'"

Though Carr did not have a direct farming lineage, his father was a military man, his mother's extended family did farm in South Carolina. That introduced the future Titan Farms owner to the business. "I worked for my uncles in the summers and was running a packing shed when I was 17," he said, adding that as a non-family employee he was exposed to many different aspects of the operation, getting his hands dirty at every level. "I knew I loved it and wanted to get into the industry."

After high school, he went to Clemson University, majoring in agriculture. He initially worked in North Carolina but then was given the opportunity to lease a farm in Florida from the estate of the family for which he worked. He worked the land in Florida, eventually purchased the farm and then sold it when he and his wife moved back to Ridge Spring, SC to manage R.W. DuBose & Sons Inc. This was a family-owned peach operation that had been in business in the area for many years.

In 1999, Chalmers and Lori Anne leased the farm from the owners and renamed it Titan Farms. Two years later they were able to secure a complete buyout. It was in 1999 that Lori Anne left her job as a schoolteacher and joined Titan Farms as vice president and administrative manager.

Initially, the farm consisted of 1,500 acres of peaches and 60 acres of vegetables. From day one, the Carrs began growing the business and increasing the diversity of the operation. Today, it produces robust crops of both broccoli and peppers to go along with its peaches. It also has a peach processing plant, which utilizes about 20 percent of the yield (17 million pounds) to create peach puree and IQF (individually quick frozen) products.

Titan Farms rebuilt its packing facility in 2015, making it what Carr called "the most technologically advanced peach packing plant in the United States." The packing lines allow the company to produce 40 different SKUs so that it can offer retailers any pack they want from bulk to many different consumer packs, including clamshells and bagged peaches. This again adds to the company's diversity. Because of COVID-19, some retailers have told Carr that they will purchase 50-100 percent more bagged peaches this season.

Carr said that diversity concept helped the company survive in its early years. He recalled 2004 when the Atkins diet fad swept the nation and caused the peach market to fall off the cliff. On the other end of the spectrum, the pepper market went through the roof and Titan farms did okay. He added that the pepper and broccoli spring and fall crops allow Titan Farms to be in the market with product close to 40 weeks per year. The peach season only lasts 16 weeks.

This year, the company is anticipating a good season with good markets. Carr noted that 90 percent of the peach crop was wiped out in 2017 by freeze, with the effects being felt in 2018 and 2019 as well. "Last year, our production got back to about 80 percent," he said. "This year we are looking at our best crop in eight years."

Before COVID-19 grounded the Titan president and CEO, Carr had gotten through about half of the 35 pre-season customer visits he makes to tout his peaches and gauge the interest in the marketplace. He said the 2017 freeze knocked out much of the production in the Southeast and allowed California peach growers to get a bit more entrenched in the region. Carr views California as the competition not his fellow peach growers in the South. "We see it as being two different peaches: a southern peach and a western peach."

While Carr said the local product is every bit as good as a California peach... and tastes better, he believes retailers should market both peaches at different price points. "We like to see retailers carry

a premium California peach and also the local southern peach sold at a value price.”

He argued that retailers that employ that merchandising philosophy do much better than those that sell both peaches at the same price, utilizing an averaging pricing system. He also advocates huge displays, “stack ‘em high and let ‘em fly,” he quipped.

His early customer trips were well received and Carr is hopeful for a good market when his season gets started in early May. The company will pick its first fruit the first full week of May and expects to have the packing shed up and running by May 11. With many of its customers within a one-day’s drive of the packing shed, Titan Farms can have its fruit on the shelves within three days of picking.

“It’s the freshest peach they can sell,” he said. “California picks the fruit and does a pre-conditioning program with a 72 degree temperature and high humidity. That’s the definition a South Carolina night.”

By the week of May 18, the company is expecting to be shipping 65 loads per week with peak shipments coming in late June/early July with about 150 loads per week.

As of late April, none of Titan farms employees, including its extensive cast of H-2A workers, had come down with the coronavirus. The company is practicing social distancing and has implemented many procedures to guard against the spread of the virus and mitigate its spread if a case does occur. Carr said the rural nature of his operation appears to have worked in the favor of the residents and his facility as contact with people is naturally limited.

Seen in the photo above are Chalmers and Lori Anne Carr.

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