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Farm Fresh Produce adds three to team

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Farm Fresh Produce considers itself an evolving company and not afraid of change.

Johnnie Herring, chief production officer of the Faison, NC-based company, said the company's success comes from not saying "no" to customers and knowing how to adapt under any circumstance.

"We have learned to adapt under any circumstance," he said. "So, COVID-19 was just a bump in the road for us. We followed all CDC guidelines and added a few ourselves to protect our employees, as well as implementing weekly testing to guarantee a safe working environment."

As for the production and business side of the new normal, Farm Fresh Produce has seen an increase in sales for the summer and early fall months due to people staying home.

“Farm Fresh Produce focuses on retail chains to drive the business and the result has been a large boom due to all shutdowns worldwide,” Herring said. “Of course, our plan is for growth and to increase our sweet potato, Napa cabbage and Bell pepper sales within the United States, Canada and Mexico.”

Still, he admitted movement was slow in March due to the uncertainty of the virus, but with people staying at home, Herring added the company saw higher demands at local grocery stores to maintain adequate food supply.

“Our retail has remained strong throughout all of the difficulties this year has brought,” he said.

Farm Fresh has had a lot of exciting things recently take place; most notably implementing a new bagger for D-pack and Wicketed-style bags.

“In March 2020, our Keener warehouse also underwent an expansion project, adding 49,400 square feet to the building,” Herring said. “In addition, we have welcomed three new employees — Pablo Fitskie, commercial director in our Netherlands’ office, Pansy Chase, financial controller and Oscar Avila, lead salesman specializing in sweet potatoes.”

Besides COVID-19, Farm Fresh Produce’s main challenge this year has been Mother Nature.

“Farmers tend to ask for more rain, but during years like this, rainfall is not the need,” Herring said. “Large amounts of rainfall hurt yields, storage life, and can possibly dilute and/or wash away fertilizer in the field to slow down the growing process of potatoes.”

Thus, it has been a very wet season, to say the least and the company has had to deal with the impact of that weather.

“With a late start to harvest, only time can tell how much yield/acreage will be lost due to wet spots in the field,” Herring said. “For the new 2020 harvest, quality seems to look good with very little pest damage. The only limiting factors will be from wet spots in the field that may cause rot. Last year’s crop is very thin, but Farm Fresh Produce is still able to fulfill our customers’ orders.”

Steven Ceccarelli, Farm Fresh Produce’s president and CEO, said the company’s plans ahead include strengthening its distribution network in Europe by having its own warehouse and repacking facilities in the Netherlands.

“We plan to grow additional crops to offer our North American and European clients,” he said.

The company just celebrated its 10th anniversary and Ceccarelli credits Farm Fresh Produce’s ability to adapt and evolve as helping to differentiate it from the competition.

“Our commitment to quality is another area we pride ourselves in,” he said. “We also have an amazing team. Our employees and growers have been a great contributing factor to our company’s growth. We all have a life outside of work and/or family commitments, but working as a team, we can overcome any obstacle. As a rapidly growing company, all members of our team give it their best.”

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