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CMI Orchards' innovation key at retail level

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The umbrella of CMI Orchards' owners and partners are leading the industry with their use of cutting-edge technology from the orchard to packing facilities. Adopted innovation delivers efficiency increases, enhancements to freshness and consistency in quality, and an ability to stay relevant at retail.

“A big focus at CMI Orchards is to strategically forecast marketplace dynamics 10 years from now. This helps us to really understand how technology can be leveraged to help our growers produce the very best fruit possible in the most efficient manner to meet anticipated consumer demands,” said Bob Mast, president of CMI Orchards.

One example of innovation in use is the software used in orchards to monitor soil moisture levels at different elevations. “This digital monitoring provides real-time data on temperature, soil moisture, and wind speed to my phone. This helps maintain proper fruit size and reduces disease and waste in our organic blocks,” said Mike Robinson, co-owner of Double Diamond Fruit.

The use of innovative technology reaches beyond the orchard. CMI Orchards’ owners and partners have invested in state-of-the-art sorting machinery in their packing sheds. “We grade and size cherries optically, taking photos of each cherry from multiple camera angles, which allows us to analyze firmness and quality to guarantee only the best product makes it into each pack,” said Robinson.

McDougall & Sons added five robotic tray fillers to its packing lines last season. “We’re now running packing stations that use robots to place the fruit in trays after grading and sorting. We’ve been incredibly pleased with the performance,” said Bryon McDougall, co-owner of the company.

“Because of the expected increase in consumer demand to purchasing packaged fruit, we’ve upgraded our packing systems. Our automated pouch bagging system automatically weighs, labels, and seals the fruit to limit handling prior to sale,” said Marc Spears, co-owner of Pine Canyon Growers. “Shoppers seem to like the conveniences pouch bags offer, and packing this way certainly offers advantages from a packing efficiency standpoint.”

“We use ozone in our storage facilities to further improve quality. With our growing focus on organics, effectively using ozone has been an important addition to our storage process. It prolongs the life of the fruit,” said Brandt Fritz, production manager at Columbia Fruit Packers.

“This has become an industry that uses technology at every step. At Yakima Fruit, sales drive many of our technology-related decisions. Shifting consumer preferences and a need to maintain a competitive price point leads us to continually look for new innovation that can help us maintain quality,” said Mike Wilcox, co-owner of Yakima Fruit.

“Many of our technology upgrades are driven by consumer demand and trying to increase efficiency with labor-intensive jobs. For example, we’re currently looking at a new palletization system that will provide efficiency with stacking and storage,” said Wilcox.

“We are continually monitoring new technology and innovation and testing based on what we believe will best meet our customers’ needs. The use of technology has allowed us to increase our efficiency, lower costs, and keep pace with consumer demand,” said Fritz.

“We’re currently considering an upgrade to our quality-control process and looking at technology which will allow us to do a better job of forecasting size and grade in our inventory system,” said Spears. “The end goal is to utilize innovation and technology to produce the freshest, best tasting and highest quality product for our customers and to ensure maximum returns for our growers.”

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