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Michigan Fresh BelleHarvest experiencing record-size Honeycrisp crop

By

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When Michigan apple marketers BelleHarvest Sales Inc. and Michigan Fresh Marketing merged in 2019, the entity represented nearly 150 growers and 3 million bushels of apples.



Evercrisp apples.

“In the full scheme of the industry, we are proud to be an important part of our regional quality apple supply out of Michigan for the winter season,” said Chuck Yow, director of U.S. sales and business development for the Belding, MI-based company. “We feel most fortunate to have been part of the solution for the supply chain during the 2020 pandemic crises, and we have been fortunate as an industry to have the products and supply chain capabilities to thrive during the needs of 2020.”

Michigan Fresh BelleHarvest will sell, grow, package and ship approximately 2 million 40 pound equivalent boxes this year, which is second best in the state of Michigan overall.

“Many of Michigan Fresh BelleHarvest’s individual apple growers have more than a century of experience farming apple orchards,” Yow said. “To survive through the decades, they have been faced with, and overcome, many obstacles and they have managed the many changes in the industry.”

In today’s competitive world of growing and marketing fruit, the company is excited to be part of the evolution of the apple industry that includes high density orchards, new varieties and technical means to store fruit for longer than ever before.

“To be successful it takes a lot of skill and a bit of luck,” Yow said. “First of all, quality fruit is essential to compete with Washington, which has great growing conditions. Michigan apple growers have answered that need by upgrading with high density orchards and implementing the best sub varieties of each main variety.”

Those being high color strains of Fuji and Gala, non-striped varieties of Red Delicious, as well as more resilient Gold Delicious varieties cutting down on blush and russet.

“We are blessed to have an awesome customer base we do business with and to have quality growers meeting those demands,” Yow said.

The current winter apple crop is sustaining a strong holding power, which means an excellent quality is expected for the second half of the season.

“Our out dates in Michigan look good, albeit just slightly ahead of last year,” Yow said. “This will be beneficial for regional supply as New York and Pennsylvania look to come to a close sooner than most years due to weather related events.”

Michigan Fresh BelleHarvest is most happy with its record-size Honeycrisp crop, which are holding well in storage.

“This will offer regional supplies of Honeycrisp into March or even April, and they will be available to ship all the way to the Southeast, Southwest, and all areas of the Northeast,” Yow said.

Without question a huge moving of the bar occurred this past year due to COVID-19. Joe D’Ottavio, CEO at Michigan Fresh and 42 North Partners, was happy to be part of the supply side for the USDA Box — Farm to Families Program.

“This was a mutually beneficial program, and it allowed for 3- and 5-pound bags taking different sizes of fruit respectively, which help contribute to greater packouts and thus profitability,” Yow said. “From an industry standpoint, consumer demand was strong for bagged apples and packaged produce products, and much of that increase is COVID-19 related.”

Michigan apple shippers were fortunate to benefit in the consumer demand shift with an increase in sustainable carton, poly bags, pouch bags and tote bags, where sales have been brisk this season.

“One side note to COVID-19 has been a reluctance by retailers to add new emerging varieties,” Yow said. “We have the Topaz, Evercrisp, and Smitten Apple varieties we feel are great apples that retailers could add to their product mix to give consumers new eating experiences, and unlike many other emerging varieties, these are affordable and more in line with today’s economic realities.”

Looking ahead, Yow anticipates some larger sizes for tray pack becoming more available next year so the company will work to manage those and work on programs and packages to move those larger sizes.

“We also are planning on a volume increase by internal means and new grower growth based on competitive returns and transparent relationships with our grower community,” he said.