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**Romaine is king at Lakeside Organic Gardens**

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By

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For 25 years, Lakeside Organic Gardens has been one of California's pioneers in organic vegetable production with leafy greens and various lettuce varieties leading the charge.



Sales Manager Brian Peixoto

Owner Dick Peixoto farmed green beans, squash and cucumbers on 40 acres of leased farmland. That farm, Lakeview Ranch, later became Watsonville, CA-based Lakeside Organic Gardens, which converted to organic in 1996. This original location is the inspiration for the Lakeside Organic Gardens logo that includes a turn-of-the-century lakefront farmhouse and water tower amidst rolling hills in the heart of Watsonville's Pajaro Valley.

Peixoto's nephew, Sales Manager Brian Peixoto, has first-hand knowledge dating back 15 years and he said romaine has certainly been its No. 1 crop in the leaf category each of those years and he

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suspects that was the case when the first organic vegetables came out of the ground 25 years ago. “Romaine is always our top seller,” he said, “followed by red leaf and green leaf.” He was speaking particularly about leaf. Their top selling commodities are broccoli, cauliflower and celery.

Lakeside Organic Gardens grows dozens of crops each year in the Pajaro Valley and its desert winter production region in the Imperial Valley. The grower-shipper is a commodity producer with 100 percent of its production being organic. “Of course, we have looked at value added but we’ve decided to focus on whole vegetables,” Peixoto said, adding that the vast majority of its production is fresh cut, packed in the field in cartons and available 365 days of the year.

The exceptions are its summer vegetable crops such as squash, Bell peppers, cucumbers and eggplant. Lakeside Organics also grows root crops (beets, parsnips, celery root, rutabagas and turnips) and specialty vegetables (black Spanish radishes, Brussels sprouts, sweet baby broccoli and watermelon radishes) on a year-round basis. But Peixoto reiterated that at its core are its commodity crops that include more than three dozen varieties.

He said the top trend in the organic leafy green business has been the rising sales of the red leaf and green leaf. While he called this past year an average year with regard to markets and demand, those items have shined bright recently, especially as the rest of the country winds down its local production. In late September, Peixoto said the leafy green market was hot and he expects it to remain above average through November. Lakeside Organics’ summer production on the California coast lasts longer than most grower-shippers as it does not transition to the desert until after Thanksgiving.

As far as a new item with increased traction in recent years, Peixoto mentioned Romanesco, which is a brassica with both broccoli and cauliflower leanings.

While Lakeside Organic Gardens does try to increase its acreage each year and add volume on a steady basis, Peixoto articulated a conservative philosophy of expansion. “We only plant what we think we can sell,” he said, noting that the company is not a speculative farmer.

He did say that organic vegetable demand continues to grow year over year with both Lakeside’s existing customers increasing their sales and new customers coming aboard. “Believe it or not, there are new retailers every year that don’t have a big organic program and are looking to start one,” Peixoto said.

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