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Church Brothers offering year-round lettuce supplies

By

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October 13, 2021

As one of the nation's largest lettuce grower-shipper-processors, Church Brothers Farms play an important role in supplying various regions of the country with high-quality lettuce in the fall and winter.

"We're getting into the transition, it can be a slippery slope, where one of the growing regions finishes and another growing region is not ready to start shipping. That's what we call the gap transition," said Jason Lathos, manager of commodities for Church Brothers Farms, headquartered in Salinas, CA. "Then there's an overlap transition where you have multiple areas going all at the



same time."

Locally-grown lettuce is in high demand in areas like Canada, New Jersey, the Ohio Valley, and Colorado, partly because of the growing trend of consumers wanting locally-grown products, but also because of increased costs in freight rates, labor, gas and insurance. Lack of labor is another issue, but even with all of those factors, cold-weather regions are looking to California, and Church Brothers

Farms, for lettuce at this time of year.

“The fall is here, it’s getting colder, product isn’t growing,” Lathos said. “Unfortunately, we are having the same type of weather issues here, where we’ve had some extremely, extremely cold weeks, and then we had extremely hot weeks, and we’ve had just basically a roller-coaster of temperatures.”

He noted that Church Brothers Farms has a planting schedule so that it can ship 52 weeks a year. It will finish iceberg lettuce in Salinas at the end of October and start growing iceberg in Huron on October 25, which is two weeks behind schedule because of weather.

“We had really hot weather, then all of a sudden, the switch to fall happened overnight and it got cold,” Lathos said. “They had two pretty good rainstorms that have gone through Huron and Yuma. It’s going to affect the customers. It’s to be determined what’s going to happen, but any time you have a disruption in a crop, you tend to see yields come down, quality come down, units per acre, pounds per acre, all the different factors that we look at to supply our customers.”

Weather is, perhaps, the biggest factor that influences the work of Church Brothers Farms.

“When it’s cooperating and things are synching perfectly, then you have great growing conditions and there are no supply chain interruptions.”

Weather is a big story around the world, and changing weather patterns makes planning even more of a challenge.

“You prepare for the worst and hope for the best,” Lathos said, adding that Church Brothers Farm works closely with its grower base in addressing the weather challenge.

Another element of the company’s work is constantly transitioning varieties in order to provide customers with the highest-quality lettuce possible.

“We’re doing that to make the best product that we can year-round,” Lathos said. “You’re working with seed growers and researchers all the time. We’re always striving to get better. Every day, every week, we’re trying to get better on varieties.”

That kind of dedication has earned Church Brothers a sterling reputation as a grower-shipper-processor of lettuce.

“We basically touch all the different styles and types of lettuces, as well as all the channels of distributions,” Lathos said, adding that among their clients are numerous quick-serve restaurants, as well as other foodservice clients, retail, export and wholesale.

“We do quite a bit of different types of styles, as well as customers, and we custom grow with those customers,” he said. “Part of our strategic plan is to develop relationships with the end user and then grow to their needs and create a good relationship.”

Lathos added that the success of Church Brothers Farms comes down to reliability and being good partners.

“I would just say, a lot of it comes down to the people,” he said. “I’ve been here for more than 30

years, and we've always had a tight-knit group of people — everyone works hard and is very passionate about what we do. It's a great company as far as the culture of the company.”

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