



**- Advertisement -**

**Nature teams with experience for flavorful Idaho apples**

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By

Kathleen Thomas Gaspar

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While Mother Nature came through spectacularly in southwest Idaho with beautiful valley terrain, temperate climate, rich soil and abundant water to create uniquely suited growing conditions, generations of experience and the equally important human element of land stewardship have definitely enhanced her efforts.

The result of that teamwork can be found in Idaho apples, both hallmark and varietals, which have become famous for their exceptional flavor.

Apples are Idaho's leading fruit crop, with statewide production of more than 60 million pounds a year. Many of the orchards and packinghouses were started decades ago, and the care that goes into the trees, packing and shipping is history-steeped. Growers and shippers know the importance of sustainability in every step, practices such as pruning during the dormant period to prepare for the next season. Maintaining both the orchards and the facilities is paramount in ensuring fruit quality and ongoing production.

The fruit of the stewards' labor, literally, is evident in time-proven varieties such as Red and Golden Delicious, Braeburn, Granny Smith, Jonathan, Jonagold and Gala. Those varieties continue to please consumers here in the United States and in export markets as well, and newer varietals such as Fuji, Pink Lady, Honeycrisp and Evercrisp are increasing in both volume and consumer demand. Idaho apples are shipped coast to coast in the United States and exported to select receivers in Pacific Rim, Central American, Canadian and Mexican markets.

Marketing efforts for all varieties are handled by the Idaho Apple Commission, which was established in 1966. The commission consists of two handler members and three grower members, each eligible to serve two three-year terms and each appointed by the Idaho governor. Sitting on the 2021-22 commission are Chair Kathy Brooke, Vice Chair Sean Rowley, Secretary/ Treasurer John Orrison and Board Member Chad Henggeler. Executive director of the commission is Candi Fitch.

Marketing campaigns coincide with the new crop harvest that traditionally commences in August with Galas. The other varieties follow in succession through the end of picking in October, and the latest apples to come in are Granny Smiths and the Pink Lady.

Many growers saw a delayed start to the season this year after a cool spring resulted in a later maturing crop. Quality, however, has been described as excellent.

Fitch said for 2022, along with advertising the commission is running, special fall promotions will be implemented. "We are still finalizing what are fall promotions will be," she said in mid-September. "We are able to offer these promotions due to the Specialty Crop Block Grants, the Idaho Apple Commission has received, and we are working with Jett Marketing to arrange the efforts that will

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include in-store demos, radio advertising, display contests and possibly a recipe contest.”

Now in her second term as chair, Brooke and her husband, Richard, have been apple growers for nearly 25 years. Taking a philosophical look at recent years — the pandemic and its disruptions, the economy and other issues — and how her industry has responded, Brooke said, “In thinking about how these past years have been different, I’m not sure they are all that different. The names of the issues may change, but it seems like there is always some challenge to overcome. Of course, some of them seem more difficult than others, but there is always some sort of hurdle to jump whether it is regulations, transportation, supplies on time, weather, political, a global pandemic, etc.”

Brooke said reaching consumers is the commission’s primary goal, explaining, “Our promotions this year are focused on the local retail and consumer level. We had some radio ads running in September and some retailer store displays.” The retail displays include a contest among those retailers the stores, and Brooke said a recipe contest “is in the works, too.”

As a salesman for apples, Kelly Henggeler, president, GM and marketing manager of Henggeler Packing in Fruitland, ID, also weighed in on issues facing the Idaho apple industry. He said, “I believe we have seen a reduction in growers continue as the lack of labor and a means to attract labor has intensified. Many industries across the country are now looking for labor, and the tight job market does not lend itself to filling seasonal labor needs.”

Henggeler added, “I would say that growers are constantly evolving, looking for better varieties, restructuring trees to reduce the amount of labor spent on the top 20 percent of the tree and adjusting production to meet available labor. Growers will continue to grow fruit that is safe and has good eating quality providing a value to our customers.”

Henggeler noted, “COVID-19 opened up some opportunities as foodservice sales decreased and retail sales increased. Also the USDA food box program provided consumers an opportunity to eat healthier. As an industry we need to build on those opportunities. I believe we were well-positioned for COVID-19 as the protocols and procedures developed for food safety reiterated the importance of good hygiene and proper way to handle fruit.”

Brooke also commented, “The future of our industry will depend on the hardy souls who are willing to tackle the challenges presented. They will be the ones who see a solution and not just an insurmountable problem. As in any business we have to be constantly on the lookout for ways to improve and upgrade, creating and finding our niche, and always creating and finding more efficiencies.”

She went on to describe efforts being made by researchers. “We have experiment under way at the Parma Research Station dealing with tree architecture,” Brooke said. “They are looking at the impact of converting mature apple trees already on dwarfing rootstocks and therefore on a wire fruiting wall to a pedestrian orchard.”

It’s “basically shortening the trees so there is no need for ladders,” Brooke said. She also said researchers are “looking at the efficiencies and cost savings versus the quality of the fruit and any potential damage to the trees. The experiment ends this fall, and so the data should be analyzed and ready this winter. Most of the growers in Washington are headed toward mechanical picking and platforms; so, this is a different approach to the same issue of reducing labor costs and becoming more efficient, minus the expense of robots.”

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Third-generation packer Henggeler, whose company was founded in 1943 and whose family orchards were first started by his great-grandfather, co-owns Henggeler Packing with his cousins, brothers Ryan and Chad, and the operation also packs and ships for J.C. Watson Packing Co. and for other area growers.

Henggeler's two biggest packed varieties are the Gala and Fuji, and he said, "We are packing and growing seven different varieties of apples. The number of growers that we pack for has diminished greatly over the past seven years with only a handful of growers remaining."

Responding to questions on labor issues that impact the orchards, he said the company has been reducing some of its apple acreage. "The profit-loss break-even point for apple blocks has increased significantly over the past five years, and some blocks are no longer sustainable," he said. "We have removed these blocks to fit the availability of the labor supply."

In Caldwell, ID, where it is managed by fourth- and fifth-generation family member, Symms Fruit Ranch started shipping its 2022 apples on Aug. 16. Eva Symms said in early September that a new early variety, the Evercrisp, is in the mix for 2022. "We planted the first field in 2020," she said.

Symms' top variety is the Red Delicious, and Eva Symms said, "Depending on the year, it can make up 30 percent of the apples we ship." In all, the ranch grows "around 10 varieties of apples," she said, adding that the operation ships only its own apples to retail, its primary market, and to processors. Typical pack options are tray packs, volume fills and bagged apples.

The company exports primarily to markets in Central America and Asia.

Recently Symms upgraded its packing facility with a computer-generated sorter that increases efficiency. And regarding COVID-19 and changes it might have brought about, Eva Symms said, "we have always practiced food safety regulations and continued to do so during the COVID-19 pandemic."

She said that labor and transportation "are always a challenge," adding, "Labor has become difficult to find, and the cost of labor keeps rising. Transportation has remained available, but the cost of shipping is high."

Optimistic about the season's start, Symms said, "The apple season is looking good so far, but it is always tricky to predict long-term strength in the market."

Caldwell, ID, is also home to Mountainland Apples, which has been shipping apples for nearly four decades. The company was formed in Utah in 1983 by a group of growers who came together to pack and market that state's fruit and eventually established additional growing and packing operations in Southwest Idaho.

Mountainland fruit grower Sean Rowley, vice chair of the Idaho Apple Commission, said his Idaho apple season started in early September with his top varieties, Galas followed by Honeycrisps mid-month. The grower also produces Golden and Red Delicious, Fujis and Granny Smiths. Two new varieties, Ambrosia and Evercrisp, are being tested and will not be available for four to five years, Rowley said.

"We have a decent crop this year," he said of volume and sizing. "The fruit quality overall looks good."

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Most of Mountainland's Idaho apples are packed at the Caldwell shed and are distributed to local and regional retailers in consumer bags and 40-pound cartons.

Rowley said he's dealing with escalating input costs, which he described as "astronomical," as well as the ongoing struggles with transportation and labor. "Labor is very tight, and we have no domestic labor outside the people who return each year. We rely heavily on H-2A, and transportation is tough. Fuel prices have made it difficult — it's tough to find trucks."

Henggeler said, "The question remains: In a supply and demand environment will growers be able to pass along substantial cost increases to their retail partners so they remain viable? Like most industries, transportation is crucial to the apple industry, and like most industries there is a lack of available drivers/workers."

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## About Kathleen Thomas Gaspar |

Kathleen is a Colorado native and has been writing about produce for more than three decades and has been a professional journalist for more than four decades. Over the years she's covered a cornucopia of crops grown both in the United States and abroad, and she's visited dozens of states – traveling by car from her home base in Colorado to the Northwest and Southeast, as far as Vancouver, BC, and Homestead, FL. Now semi-retired, Kathleen continues to write about produce and is also penning an ongoing series of fiction novels. She's a wife, mother of two grown sons and grandmother of six, and she and her fly fisherman husband Abe reside in the Banana Belt town of Cañon City.

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