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Walnut demand ready to take off thanks to California groups

By

Keith Loria

May 17, 2023

The [California Walnut Board and California Walnut Commission](#) reported that walnuts rank in the top 10 agricultural crops in California and are the fifth-highest exported crop.

“The California walnut industry supports over 80,000 jobs throughout the state,” said Robert Verloop, executive director and CEO of the California Walnut Board and California Walnut Commission. “Production has grown to match global demand for this nutritional, plant-based food, with over 1 billion pounds harvested in 2022.”

Walnuts were first cultivated by the Franciscan Fathers in the late 1700s, and by the 1870s commercial walnut production had begun in the Santa Barbara area. Over time, production moved north into the Central Valley. Encompassing over 400,000 acres and supporting more than 4,600 growers, the majority are family farms who have owned the land for multiple generations, some reaching back over 125 years.

“Over 95 percent of consumers know that walnuts are a healthy and good for you,” Verloop said. “To align with the consumers understanding to the health and nutrition benefits walnut need to be merchandised where consumers are thinking about healthy, clean label, convenient to incorporate with the meal or as a snack.”

Largely seen as a baking nut, which aligns with flavor and texture, the commission is starting a campaign this year to expand the presence in more health-forward merchandising.

“Not only are fresh walnuts a great companion on all of our daily meals, they are a convenient on-the-go snack,” Verloop said. “We will work with our industry to introduce more flavored walnuts in a range of pack sizes to appeal to the consumers need for a portable on-the-go option.”

The California Walnut Commission and California Walnut Board both exist to help growers prosper by working collaboratively with them and handlers in an effort to expand demand and activate more sales to consumers and trading partners.

“We will continue to provide marketing support to develop existing and emerging markets on a global bases, but our focus will be to expand the North America markets,” Verloop said. “Retailers can position walnuts for success by merchandising them in sections of the store that align with health — produce and snacking. Walnuts should not be relegated to holiday baking, but spotlighted throughout the year through promotional activity.”

The current crop is just now starting to bloom, with the winter rains providing long overdue winter moisture to invigorate the roots, the trees are roaring back with a very lush and even bud break as they begin to “leaf” out.

“This is a very encouraging sign as it indicated the trees have stored up energy which translated to big, full walnuts by harvest time which is mid-August to November,” Verloop said. “With the rise of plant-based eating and clean-label products, consumers have been very interested in walnuts as the base in plant-based tacos, meatballs, sausage and more. With their rich flavor and creamy texture, they are also ideal as a non-dairy alternative to cream or milk in sauces, soups and creamy desserts. Additionally, walnuts have a long history in many global cuisines and pair well with both savory and sweet flavors.”

Consumers today want foods that are natural, nutritious and grown responsibly, and California walnuts are a whole food with more than 30 years of researched health benefits that have evaluated their potential benefit on cardiovascular outcomes, cognitive and gut health, cancer, weight management and more.

“Walnuts are also one of the few foods to contain a rich source of essential ALA, the plant-based omega-3 fat that has been associated with heart and brain health,” Verloop said. “Our growers care deeply about the land that they farm, carefully managing resources in order to produce a crop that can leave a legacy across generations of family members.”

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About Keith Loria |

A graduate of the University of Miami, Keith Loria is a D.C.-based award-winning journalist who has been writing for major publications for close to 20 years on topics as diverse as real estate, food and sports. He started his career with the Associated Press and has held high editorial positions at magazines aimed at healthcare, sports and technology. When not busy writing, he can be found enjoying time with his wife, Patricia, and two daughters, Jordan and Cassidy.

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