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Booth Ranches now packing Murcotts and lemons as well as oranges

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Historically, Booth Ranches LLC in Orange Cove, CA, has been “very, very heavy to oranges with nothing else really to offer our customers.” But “we’ve had increasing pressure from customers who have said, ‘It would be nice if you had a little something else to add to put on the truck,’” Neil Galone, vice president of marketing, said in an interview with The Produce News Oct. 17.

“So this year, we will be packing some W. Murcott Mandarins that will start late January and run through February and most of March,” he said. “This is kind of our first step into offering some other varieties.”

In addition, “we grow a few lemons — just a handful — and we are going to sell them ourselves, too,” he said. “Historically, we have had somebody else pack and sell them for us, but this year we are going to do them as well. It will only be a three to four week deal in January, but again it is a step in expanding our product offerings to meet our customers’ needs.”

All of the Booth’s oranges, both Navels and Valencias, are grown on company ranches. “We are not a big marketing organization,” Mr. Galone said. “We are the grower. The only oranges that we pack and sell are the ones we grow ourselves.” In the orange category, “we don’t take any fruit from outside growers.”

He does not expect that to change. “I don’t see us ever doing anybody else’s oranges. We get a consistency day-in and day-out by packing the same fruit from the same grower that is difficult for others to match, and we don’t want to compromise that,” he said. “Plus we’ve got enough oranges

of our own that we don't really need to take any from anybody else."

But with the Murcotts, the situation is a little different. The Murcotts "are mostly grown by us" but not exclusively, Mr. Galone said. "For the first time, we have found another grower" whose fruit the company will be packing and marketing. "This is our first venture into having a handful of somebody else's fruit."

It was an arrangement the company entered into cautiously. "We wanted to make sure that if we did align ourselves with any other growers, that they had the same philosophy we did" and that the fruit was good enough to be packed under the "Booth Ranches" label, he said. "At one point we talked about maybe putting a different label on them because they weren't grown 100 percent by Booth." But "my direction from [managing partner and President] Loren Booth was that if you are not happy enough with this deal to put my name on it, then it is not the right deal."

Therefore, he continued, "we are going to pack these Murcotts in a 'Booth Ranches' box or bag. We are going to do the five-pound box and the three-pound bags."

In the Navels, Mr. Galone expected to start harvesting on Tuesday, Oct. 23, "which will mean first availability [for shipping] on the 29th of October." There will only be limited availability that week, he said. "It is always tough getting started, for everybody." He expected "good availability starting the week of the 5th [of November] and continuing on, then, throughout the season."

For Booth Ranches, "our target is to run through June" on the Navels, he said. "We will have regulars well into May, and then we will transition into lates. They run us through the end of May and through June."

The company's Navel volume is strongest from January through April. "We start to fall off in May and June, but what we have found is demand is still pretty good in May and even into June," so a good portion of the company's newer plantings have been in the late varieties and are "targeted to fill that space."

The industry estimate for the 2012-13 California Navel crop is 93 million boxes, marginally larger than the 90 million-box crop last year. "I think the estimate is probably pretty close," Mr. Galone said. "Whenever the industry has an increase, we always have a little more of an increase because we still have some groves that are young" as well as some new plantings not yet in production. "If the industry crop goes up two or three percent, ours may go up 6 or 7 percent because of new production coming on."

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