

Crops & Markets

Interest grows in California blueberry industry

PARLIER, Calif. — The development of heat-tolerant blueberry varieties is attracting more potential California grower-shippers.

More than 60 growers turned out May 19 for a tour of San Joaquin Valley growing and packing operations, followed by a day-long blueberry and blackberry field day at the University of California Kearney Research and Extension Center, Parlier. A show of hands indicated most of the attendees are not berry growers.



Don Schrack

Blueberry growing in California can be an expensive mistake if growers fail to start correctly, says Steve Blizzard, director of farming for Logomarsino Farms, Tulare, Calif. “Buy good healthy plants from a reputable nursery,” he says. “If you get poor plants, you’ll never make it up.”

The new blueberry varieties are holding up well in the often hot temperatures of the valley, said Manuel Jimenez, small farm program advisor with UC Cooperative Extension in Tulare County, but blackberries are another matter.

“When temperatures climb above 100 degrees, farmers can lose as much as 50% of the blackberry crops grown without shade protection,” he said.

As a result, some growers are experimenting with shadehouse growing, he said.

Researchers at the facility may have another solution, a rotating trellis system designed to prevent sunburn for blackberry varieties that are harvested in June and July, Jimenez said.

Because blueberries are so new to California, growing the commodity has been something of a trial and error experience for most growers, said Steve Blizzard, director of farming for Lagomarsino Farms, Tulare. For instance, the company lost several acres of berries, he said, when he over irrigated.

Lagomarsino Farms now has 100 acres of the berries, Blizzard said. The blueberries are planted 1,200 to the acre, he said, with an above-ground drip irrigation system and heavy mulch around the plants. During hot weather, the drip system is used three times a day.

“The only varieties we’re growing are emeralds and jewels, but we’re looking at other varieties,” Blizzard said.

Pruning keeps the bushes at a maximum height of about six feet, he said.

Pest problems are limited, so far, to a couple of species of thrips, the citrus thrip and the flower thrip, Jimenez said. The pests can be a major problem, he said, but pesticides can keep them in check.

Picking began May 11 and will continue into June, said Briana Logomarsino, the company’s packing-house manager.

“The berries are picked in buckets and are then emptied into totes for the trip to the packinghouse,” she said.

The berries do not go directly into totes, she said, because that approach tends to bruise the fruit.

The blueberries grown and packed by Lagomarsino Farms are marketed by SunnyRidge Farm Inc., Winter Haven, Fla., she said.

Berry harvesting is labor intensive, said David Munger, co-owner of Delano-based Munger Farms. The harvest requires about six workers per acre, he said. Because the berries ripen at different times, picking crews work the same fields every two or three days during peak harvest times, he said.

Blizzard cautioned growers who are thinking of getting into the blueberry industry that starting correctly can mean the difference between success or failure in blueberry growing.