



The Bings are back: Cherry orchards yield later, lighter harvest

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By Jim Morris

It's 5:30 a.m. and Mitch Mariani is out and about, anxiously checking the weather forecast and hoping to get his cherry crop in Morgan Hill harvested without complications.

This scene is repeated throughout the state's cherry-growing areas this time of year, as it's harvest time for one of California's most delicate crops.

"You have to be willing to take some risks to raise cherries," Mariani said. "It's nice if you're diversified and have some other crops besides, and you don't have to depend 100 percent on cherries. They are an early summer crop and are very susceptible to rainfall. But when you do get a good crop and the market is good, the rewards are good."

Weather did a number on this year's cherry crop, with the California Cherry Advisory Board estimating a total harvest of 50 million pounds, down about 60 percent from a normal season and what may prove to be the lightest production since 1998.



Farmer Jeff Colombini of Lodi assesses this year's crop.

"You just have to grin and bear it--that's what it means to be a cherry farmer," said Jeff Colombini, who farms in Lodi. "You can run into situations where you lose your entire crop with one rainy day. There are not a lot of crops where one weather event can wipe out your entire season."

Although slow to mature and with reduced supplies, the crop has commanded good prices to start the season, Colombini said, but added, "the yields are so low that we doubt the increased price will make up for the reduced yield."

The Bing variety accounts for about 75 percent of the California crop, and Colombini and Mariani agree it will likely remain on top.

"No plant breeder has yet to develop a variety that is superior to the Bing in terms of flavor and firmness," Colombini said.

"It's been around for a long time and it's hard to improve upon it," Mariani said. "A lot of it is tradition, too. It's the one that's the best known and that everybody waits for."

(Jim Morris is a reporter for Ag Alert. He may be contacted at jmorris@cfbf.com.)

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