

Berries

BY CHRIS CRAWFORD

THIS YEAR'S BERRY SEASON looks to offer a promotable quantity of product, including some new offerings from suppliers.

And while the long-term pandemic continues to affect the supply chain, packaging, labor and related transportation costs, suppliers offer their tips on how to maximize berry sales to recover additional charges.

So far, Watsonville, Calif.-based Well-Pict Inc. has experienced good growing seasons for its early season berries, said Jim Grabowski, vice president of marketing.

"In California, rains in later December followed by cooler temperatures have pushed production of strawberries back by a couple of weeks," he said, adding that mid-January was the goal to begin production out of Oxnard, Calif., fields, with volume picking up through the following weeks.

Jerry Moran, vice president of sales for Naturipe Farms, Salinas, Calif., agreed that strong California rainfall delayed winter/spring crops, "but our Mexican Strawberries are really starting to pick up in production and will be in good supply for Valentine's Day."

Naturipe also sources blueberries from South America, first from Peru, later from Chile.

"We will follow up with our Mexican crop, which occurs in late February into March," Moran said. "We have also seen an increase in our Mexican raspberry crop, as our proprietary varieties have shown a great deal of potential. We are excited to see such great volumes just around the corner."

Plant City, Fla.-based Wish Farms supplies all major berries, with growers harvesting from Chile to British Columbia to offer year-round offerings.

Currently, the company is growing and harvesting strawberries and pineberries in Florida and will continue to do so through March, said Nick Wishnatzki, public relations manager. It will then shift production to California around April.

"The weather has cooperated well so far in Florida (dry and not too cold or hot), so strawberry yield has been solid, while quality and flavor have been exceptional," he added.

Wish Farms sources blueberries from Chile and Peru through March, when it shifts to its domestic Florida crop. The company primarily harvests blackberries and raspberries in Mexico until late spring. Its ranches in Southern California, Georgia and North Carolina carry the volume until the Mexican harvest season begins ramping back up around September.

New berries, promotions

As a result of the pandemic, consumers are starting to use the "food is medicine" concept more readily with their food choices, said Moran of Naturipe.

"Nutrition as a health perspective has been brought to the forefront as a result," he said. "We think there's a ripe opportunity to leverage that messaging and turn it into more sales. As health trends rise, consumers will continue to buy berries for the numerous health benefits, including high levels of antioxidants, fiber and other nutrients."

Naturipe is launching a new "Berry Gem" program, as well as continuing its "Mighty Blues" program. The Berry Gem program differentiates some of the company's new varieties by focusing on flavor and quality.

"This will help retailers show off the hard work that our growers have done in developing these new varieties," Moran said.

Naturipe's Mighty Blues program will continue to promote the quality, size and flavor of its blueberries.

Grabowski of Well-Pict said berries sell themselves when they are fresh, full-colored and aromatic. "Retailers just need to place them in a prominent place within the produce department where consumers can see them and easily pick them up," he said.

The best-selling berry product is hands down the 1-pound clamshell container of strawberries, Grabowski said.

"Since the introduction of clamshell containers, the 1-pound strawberry unit has been the industry workhorse," he added. "It is the go-to unit for most promotions, being sold singularly or in sales featuring multiple sales units, such as 2 for xx dollars, 3 for xx dollars or the buy one, get one free/reduced price sale."

Later in the season, when all berry varieties are available, the "Berry Patch" concept always works well by placing strawberries, raspberries, blackberries and blueberries in a grouping where the consumer can do one-stop shopping, Grabowski said.

Multiple pack sizes are best to capture all purchases from different shoppers, said Moran of Naturipe.

"Carrying two or more pack sizes for each berry commodity allows the consumer to make their preferred choice," he added. "We have seen





Think pink

Gary Wishnatzki of Plant City, Fla.-based Wish Farms said that this season, the company is excited to promote its new Pink-A-Boo Pineberries.

“We call it the ‘fifth berry’ and it is creating quite a buzz with consumers and retailers,” he said. “It is exciting, because for the first time in many years, there is a new strawberry variety that is visually different, as opposed to previous varietal changes which didn’t look drastically different from traditional red strawberries.”

Pink-A-Boo Pineberries is a play on words, referencing the berry’s ripe pink hue. Pineberries are white in color and turn a pink blush when ripe.

“It has a strawberry flavor, but with essences of pineapple, pear, and apricot,” Wishnatzki said. “Since its sugar content is slightly elevated, and they have lower relative acidity than traditional red strawberries, it has a delicate flavor finish that leaves the palate pleasantly refreshed.”

Pink-A-Boo Pineberries are packed in a one-layer, 10-ounce consumer unit. The label features a picture of a ripe pineberry and the phrase “Ripe and Ready” to help educate consumers on the new-look berry. The branded, bright-pink box holds six of these units.

To promote Pink-A-Boo Pineberries, Wish Farms is engaging a robust social media blitz across multiple platforms. “Shoppers have become conditioned to look for a bright red strawberry, so it is up to us to educate the consumer and drive sales for our retail partners with this unique addition to the produce aisle,” Wishnatzki said.

Wish Farms plans to harvest nearly 100 acres of Pink-A-Boo Pineberries in Florida until April, and 150 acres in California, increasing through June and into fall.

Produce: Berries

an increase in demand for both standard and larger pack sizes as retailers want to make sure everyone is included in their sales strategies.”

Grabowski also emphasized that promoting berries’ health and immunity-boosting properties continues to be a successful sales technique throughout the pandemic, a time when shoppers are more conscious about protecting their health.

During heavy berry promotions, make sure to get them at the front of the produce department, he said.

“The natural color distribution between the four main berries helps keep things vibrant,” Grabowski added. “Cross-promotion with complementary products is also an effective strategy to increase overall basket size.”

Additionally, cross-promotions based on convenience and ease-of-use are popular with shoppers. “For example, merchandising blueberries with oatmeal puts a healthy and balanced breakfast all in one place in-store, making a shopper’s grocery experience more efficient,” he said.

Naturipe continues to offer large pack sizes so consumers can upsize at their time of purchase, Moran said. “We offer 2-pound strawberries, 18-ounce blueberries and 12-ounce raspberries consistently throughout the year and can even provide larger pack sizes in the season’s peak supply periods,” he added.



Promoting berries’ healthfulness during the pandemic has been a boon for Naturipe and other shippers.

As consumers continue to evolve in their shopping habits, Naturipe has made these larger packs more readily available throughout the year so retailers can maximize the shoppers’ time in their stores, Moran said.

Pandemic adjustments

While demand has continued to be strong from last season to this year during the pandemic, one major difference has been substantial increases in supplier costs, said Wishnatzki of Wish Farms.

“Due mostly to pandemic supply chain issues, we are seeing inputs, packaging, transportation and labor costs go up across the board in excess of 20%,” he said. “Consumers are certainly feeling the pinch, but retail cost increases are well justified given the inflationary environment we are experiencing on the production side.”

Suppliers also continue to bolster their safety efforts during the evolving pandemic.

Moran said Naturipe’s No. 1 priority is the health and safety of its staff, communities, and products, Moran said.

“We’re proud to say that despite the global challenges we’ve all faced, we have been able to continue operations and provide our customers and consumers with the high-quality, fresh fruit and value-added products they know and love, especially at a time when nutrient-rich foods became more crucial than ever before,” he said.

Moran noted one major pandemic-related trend that continues to affect business is consumers using e-commerce for their grocery needs this past year.

“While it’s great that consumers have a safe way to restock their fridges, it is a challenge for retailers to reach consumers the way they traditionally could in-store,” he said.

Retailers typically rely heavily on in-store merchandising and promotions to influence purchasing decisions.

“Additionally, when it comes to fresh produce, the physical, sensorial experience – the smell, vibrant colors, etc. – that heavily influence consumers to purchase a piece of fresh fruit cannot be replicated online,” he added.

All of these factors present retailers with challenges and impact the way they operate.

“We’re continually working with retailers to support their adapting strategies to continue driving sales and ensuring consumers can find high-quality, fresh fruit and snacking products online,” Moran concluded.

