

# Stemilt Growers expects later start for California cherries



California has had historic cool weather that delayed the onset of the state's cherry bloom. Photo: Olga Kriger, Adobe stock

By Tom Karst

**C**alifornia cherries will start a little later this year for Stemilt Growers, says Marketing Director Brianna Shales.

"We are late and anticipating a start in May as opposed to April," Shales said, noting that California has had historic cool weather that delayed the onset of the state's cherry bloom.

Stemilt has growing, packing and shipping operations called Stemilt Chincholo California located in Stockton, Calif.

Stemilt typically starts its California cherry harvest in late April or early May and continues through the California season with late-to-harvest lapin cherries. The marketer grows cherries in Brentwood/Westley, River/Delta and historic Stockton/Lodi districts.

"Coral is a top variety for us, and so our peak aligns well with timing for retail promotions out of California, which this year look to line up with Memorial Day and after," Shales said.

Coral is Stemilt's main dark-sweet cherry variety, she said.

"We also grow the royal types, bings and have a great lapin deal that helps us harvest cherries fresh daily in the River/Delta district

at the end of the California deal," she said.

Stemilt's California cherry deal also includes a few organics and some rainier cherries. The rainiers are packed on a new electronic line for packing efficiency and consistency, she said.

## Timing

As of late March, the timing between the California and Washington cherry crops looked good, Shales said, with a mild overlap between states expected.

"Both regions are late, but it is still [too] early to make big projections," she said.

While there were plenty of blooms on the trees as of late March, Shales said weather conditions will determine how well the crop will set.

The late bloom made it difficult to project California volume as of late March, she said.

"We are expecting a later peak than last year and anticipate the peak to line up OK with a Memorial Day ad break, and then promotable volumes in June to help continue that momentum of the first cherry promotion," she said. "Sometimes California peak aligns with Mother's Day ads, but that is not the case this year. We will have California cherries later into June this year, where last year it wound up earlier in that month and

gapped between Washington's start."

Retailers can maximize sales by adjusting quickly to the changing crop expectations, she said.

"We all know that 'no two cherry seasons are ever alike,' and so the best approach is to plan but be willing to quickly change the plan when an opportunity in the crop strikes," Shales said. "Promote quality always and consumers will respond by enjoying the cherry experience and coming back for more."

Stemilt is touting its 5 River Islands program in California, Shales said.

"This is a great storytelling opportunity for retailers who want to connect the consumer with where cherries are grown and promote a premium product," she said. "These cherries are hand-picked from the California Delta region and are all lapins. We select the very best and use branding to help set these cherries apart on the shelf.

"It's a great merchandising strategy for leaving consumers with a lasting impression of California-grown cherries and is especially beneficial for West Coast/California retailers where locals want crops from nearby," she continued. "They are available in June and should segue nicely into Washington's crop this year." **P**