

Editorial

New Varieties: Risk vs. Rewards and Success

Is planting a new variety too risky? Will new variety sales cannibalize traditional variety sales? Will every “managed” variety succeed? These are questions commonly asked by growers when discussing new varieties. The answers are: Maybe (for some growers), YES and NO.

If you are interested in remaining in the apple industry in the future, you must replant. If retirement is nearing or you don’t have the interest in meeting new regulations or market demands, you may opt for removing older, unprofitable orchards and leaving the ground open for the next person to plant. If you are interested in increasing profits, you **must** replant to new varieties. New variety sales are cannibalizing traditional variety sales (some more than others) — it has always been that way, the varieties grown in New York State have been evolving since the time of the original 13 colonies. Every grower needs a plan for acreage renewal. You probably don’t need to run as many acres as you have in the past — higher density plantings have greater yield potential and trying to replant every apple acre would present a cash flow challenge, and contribute to over production and lower prices. Some of your acreage probably needs to be renewed to higher coloring strains of existing varieties, but it would be a mistake not to plant a significant percent of new acreage to recently released varieties.

Growers adverse to taking risk and those not paying attention to the “variety scene” in the US and around the world will likely make a “safe” bet and plant the best current strain of traditional varieties. If said grower has been a process apple grower, profits for that grower may increase if apple quality meets market requirements. Profits are unlikely to increase for a fresh apple grower using the same strategy if the demand for “traditional” varieties is increasing. However, if

new apple varieties are cannibalizing sales of those varieties, then demand is likely to decrease. Limiting new plantings to more desirable strains of traditional varieties thus becomes a “risky” venture for a fresh apple grower.

So how should you proceed when selecting which new variety to plant? Ask yourself these questions:

1. Will this variety “**stand out**” in the eyes & mouth of the consumer it is targeted to please? Who is that consumer? Is it someone desiring a sweet, crisp apple, a sweet-tart apple or a tart apple? Has the marketer targeted the particular consumer and developed a plan to reach that consumer? Is there any consumer research data referenced in the marketer’s plan? What is the promotional / marketing plan based on?
2. Will this variety “fit” (harvest timing) my farm? Can I manage the tree and get the fruit picked to meet the expectations of the marketer? Is there information available on the cultural management of this variety? What are the tree’s growth habits (weak/strong), does it have any peculiarities and what are the problems with the particular variety? Have any storage problems ever been experienced with the variety?
3. Is there a plan to engage researchers to address varietal problems? What is the reputation of the marketer? Has the designated marketer had success in marketing other new varieties? Has the marketer set “packout” standards and a consumer quality assurance plan? Will a field person be available to guide me in meeting those standards?

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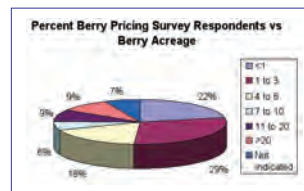
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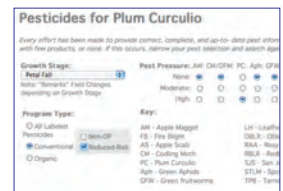
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COVER: N-Blosi Worker Positioning Platform demonstration at 2009 Cornell WNY Summer Orchard Tour.
Inset picture of grower-manufactured pruning platform demonstrated at Winter Pruning Workshop in Niagara County, NY.

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NEW YORK
Fruit Quarterly

SUMMER 2010 • VOLUME 18 • NUMBER 2

This publication is a joint effort of the New York State Horticultural Society, Cornell University's New York State Agricultural Experiment Station at Geneva, the New York State Apple Research and Development Program, and the NYSBGA.

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(Editorial, cont.)

4. What is being planted in Washington and China? Ultimately whatever you do as a grower will be affected by the production from these two areas — can you directly compete or avoid competing with Washington State or China?

You will be investing significant capital just in preparing the ground, planting the trees, installing trellis and possibly irrigation. The tree or acre fee for a managed variety is often insignificant in comparison to the cost of planting. With those thoughts in mind, only you can ask enough questions to determine whether a “newly released variety” is right for your operation. Don't rely on others to ask the questions, or run the cost and return projections to determine the potential payback period or return on investment — it is your investment and you are the one taking the risk!

Finally, always keep the end consumer in mind; your job is to produce a product that the consumer will want to buy again and again, at a price, which allows you to make a profit.

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