

NMPRO

Nursery

MANAGEMENT & PRODUCTION

April 2010

L.E. COOKE CO.

Serving up delectable nursery stock p. 14

Ron Ludekens and David Cox



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Ron Ludekens (left), president of L.E. Cooke Co., and CEO David Cox are the third generation at the helm of the nursery. See Page 14.

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Ron Ludekens (left), president of L.E. Cooke Co., and CEO David Cox have a pretty scrumptious job — choosing fruit tree varieties to introduce to the trade.

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By Kelli Rodda

Tasty Marketing

L.E. Cooke Co. is serving up delectable fruit trees

There's a certain theme park located on both coasts that claims to be the happiest place on Earth. Well, I think I found the tastiest place – L.E. Cooke Co. in Visalia, Calif. This 66-year-old family nursery has fields filled with chin-dripping, wipe-your-mouth-on-your-sleeve goodness. L.E. Cooke specializes in fruit trees, which are sold primarily to independent garden centers.

Taste is L.E. Cooke's No. 1 priority, said Ron Ludekens, president of the nursery and grandson of founder L.E. (Ted) Cooke.

"Our fruit trees are selected for great taste first and foremost. If they happen to have a long harvest season, all the better," Ludekens said.

L.E. Cooke personnel are the taster-testers, and from May through November, employees rank the fruit's taste and make recommendations.

Making marketing count

Superb taste is a priority, but a well-planned and executed marketing strategy is necessary for solid fruit tree sales.

L.E. Cooke provides picture tags for each tree. Besides a glossy picture of the

fruit, the tag also includes icons that describe uses for fruit (fresh, canned, ice cream, etc.) and if the flowers are of ornamental value. Tags are printed in-house on one of two printers that use resin ink – an HP and a Xerox.

"I prefer the HP for the quality, but it's not as fast as the Xerox," Ludekens said. He found the printers through Grow-Tech Solutions in Rogersville, Mo.

Picture tags are helpful, but the nursery also trains garden center personnel how to market the trees. Retailers need to ask consumers: What type of fruit do you want?; and What months do you

All orders come with a picture tag.



John Fanick peach features large, freestone, yellow-fleshed fruit that ripens in mid- to late-July and attractive flowers in spring.

want the trees to produce fruit?

Consumers shopping at garden centers need to know the benefits of having fresh fruit in their own back yard. They can forego the traffic and crowded grocery stores. Forget about overpriced, mediocre produce, and instead enjoy fresh, convenient and flavorful fruit.

"When most homeowners eat super-market fruit, picked hard, held in storage and shipped long distances, the fruit has little taste. But buyers seem to forget and return for more," Ludekens said. "When you eat fresh fruit, picked tree ripe, dripping with flavor and sweetness, it is a great joy."

Sound selections

Besides tantalizing the taste buds, fruit trees also offer ornamental value.

"We like to have trees that have two seasons of interest," Ludekens said.

Other factors considered for selecting a variety include size – backyards are getting smaller and homeowners



Ron Ludekens (left), president of L.E. Cooke and CEO David Cox are the third generation at the helm of the nursery.

don't want to climb ladders to retrieve fruit – and self-pollinating varieties.

"There's a misconception that fruit trees are a lot of work," said David Cox, CEO of L.E. Cooke. "Once they're established, they're really low maintenance."

The nursery has one of the largest selections of heirloom fruits. These old favorites are still in demand because of their excellent taste, Ludekens said.

L.E. Cooke also grows more than 1,100 selections of trees and shrubs, shipped bareroot across North America.



For more: L.E. Cooke Co., www.lecooke.com.



Chrystal White lilac is an early bloomer and features long stems good for cut flowers.

Drip irrigation conversion saves water, boosts tree health

L.E. Cooke Co. is completing its conversion from furrow irrigation to drip irrigation, a decision that was first thought of as a water-saving measure.

"The original decision was purely to be good stewards of resources and cut down on water usage," said Ron Ludekens, president of L.E. Cooke.

It was done a few fields at a time because of the up-front costs.

Some five years ago, the nursery dedicated a parcel of land as a Netafim test site for new drip technology, said David Cox, CEO of L.E. Cooke.

"We have a lot of open-discharge pumps from the furrow irrigation. This low-pressure drip system allows me to basically bolt a couple of components to my discharge pumps and blow and go," Cox said.

The main supply line that feeds the rows is called Layflat and sits above-ground, Cox said.

Besides the obvious water savings, the grower noticed improved tree quality and root systems.

"The consistency of size across the rows was improved – even in fields with weak spots such as sand streaks," Ludekens said. "When the hottest temperatures arrive in the summer, we can irrigate whole fields at once and prevent trees from shutting down – again aiding the uniformity of growth and branching."

But the biggest improvements were hidden until harvest.

"The root systems are vastly improved. Keeping the water and nutrients in the immediate root zone instead of in the furrows between rows of trees meant the digger blades no longer cut off the fibrous roots – they stay with the tree," he said. "Some nurseries undercut their trees to accomplish this, and we have accomplished the same effect without running the risk of slowing tree growth or introducing disease like crown gall to the cut roots."

Implementing drip irrigation also greatly reduced tractor work, weeding and dust suppression.