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New Sweet Cherries from Cornell are Too Good for the Birds

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CONTACT: Linda McCandless, llm3@cornell.edu, 315-787-2417

GENEVA, NY: If consumers ate as many sweet cherries as the birds seem to, fruit farmers might be singing a different tune all the way to the bank. On August 1, when two new sweet cherry varieties are released by Cornell University fruit breeders during the 2002 Cornell Fruit Field Day, in Orleans County, NY, the birds, the farmers and the public will all have something to crow about.

WhiteGold® Cherries

CREDIT: B.Anderson/NYSAES/Cornell

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"BlackGold™ and WhiteGold® will help fruit growers who want to diversify their operations by giving them two more options to expand their plantings of stone fruits," said Cornell horticulturist Bob Andersen. "We have new and improved varieties suited to growing conditions in the Northeast, and new management techniques to improve quality and yield."

BlackGold™ sweet cherries are dark red, heart-shaped, and good for fresh market and out-of-hand eating. WhiteGold® is yellowish-red and excellent for either fresh market or processed use. Both cherries are self-fertile, cold-hardy and dependable croppers. They are mid- to late-season bloomers, which means they have a better chance of escaping some late frosts, like those that destroyed most of New York's and Canada's sweet cherry crop this year. The fruit matures mid-season (typically mid-July

in central New York), and is relatively tolerant to fruit cracking. Typical yields are 200-250 lbs per tree.

"Both varieties have been tested as grafted trees that utilize either full vigor rootstocks or semi-dwarfing rootstocks," says Andersen, whose career as a stone fruit breeder spans more than 40 years. Semi-dwarfing rootstocks allow high-density sweet cherry orchards of these varieties ranging from 300 to 500 trees per acre, and will start bearing cherries in their third year in the orchard. Trees can keep bearing for 30 to 40 years. Because these particular varieties are self-fertile, farmers and home enthusiasts do not have to plant another variety to cross-pollinate them, he says.

So what's the most critical aspect of harvesting a good crop? "Birds love cherries, too," said Andersen. "Either plant enough trees for both the birds and your customers, or cover the trees with nets."

Cherries Help Fight Cancer

Andersen has been breeding stone fruits at the New York State Agricultural Experiment Station in Geneva, NY, since 1985. In an effort to help the Northeast growers compete in the marketplace, he expects to release two more sweet cherries and two new plums before he retires next year. "Two things give New York stone fruit farmers an advantage to capitalize on," said Andersen. "Proximity to East Coast markets, and the public's growing awareness of the importance of a healthy diet."

Sweet cherries and tart cherries are powerful sources of antioxidants. Other dark-colored fruits like plums, grapes, blueberries, and raspberries are in increased demand by consumers because of their cancer-fighting, healthful properties. According to Cy Lee, a food scientist at the Experiment Station who measures the nutraceutical value of fruits, "Cherries are

"We've croped WhiteGold® three seasons and we like it because it's a little earlier than 'Emperor Francis'."

Jim Bittner, Singer Farms, Appleton, NY

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BlackGold™ Cherries

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actually a much better source of phytochemicals than apples. But their antioxidant contribution to our diet is less than apples because we consume so many more apples than cherries."

"Black Gold™" has been frost tolerant and a consistent cropper for us."

Joe Nicholson, Red Jacket Orchards, Geneva, NY

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In 2002, the production of sweet cherries in New York was 900 tons and the crop was valued at $1.23 million. New York ranks fourth in the nation in tart cherry production, and eighth in sweet cherry.

Breeding Programs at the Station

Cornell University's fruit breeding program is world-renowned. Since 1880, when the Experiment Station opened, fruit breeders have released 243 varieties of fruit, including five peaches/nectarines, 11 plums, 11 cherries and three apricots. Many of the stone fruit releases have become industry standards and commercial successes. Most notable among them are the 'Ulster' and 'Hudson' sweet cherries, and 'Stanley' and 'Castleton' plums.

Plant breeding is not a career for people in a hurry. Fruit breeders pay scrupulous attention to details that are time-consuming to acquire and labor-intensive to decipher. They make hundreds of crosses and evaluate the resultant seedlings prior to field planting. Once in the field, the breeders evaluate the trees over many seasons, acquiring data on shape, yield, and suitability to climate. Post-harvest, food scientists evaluate the fruit for flavor, quality, firmness, and storage potential.

Fruit growers depend on new varieties to keep one step ahead of insects, disease, the weather, and the competition. It can take several decades for new varieties to be accepted on a name-recognition basis by a public that tends to know or care very little about how food arrives on their table.

BlackGold™ and WhiteGold® will be patented by the Cornell Research Foundation (CRF) as 'Ridgewood' and 'Newfane', respectively, and will be sold under their trademark designations. Sublicenses will be available to nurseries through a unique arrangement with International Plant Management, Inc., the CRF-designated exclusive licensee [see related press release].

Consumers can start looking for these cherries at their local fruit farms next summer because some trees are already under commercial cultivation. Trees are available to growers for 2003 at their favorite stone fruit nurseries.

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A related article on the marketing arrangement between Cornell Research Foundation and International Plant Management, Inc., is available on http://www.nysaes.cornell.edu/pubs/press/current/CRFHeusercherry.html

Dr. Bob Andersen can be reached at 315-787-2235. Wanda Gale at International Plant Management, Inc., can be reached at 1-800-424-2765


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