Favorite Cherry Varieties: Grower Observations

Presented as a Panel at the 2013 Mid-Atlantic Fruit and Vegetable Conference, Hershey PA

Win Cowgill, ***New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station***
Justin Weaver, ***Grower- Weaver's Orchard, Inc.***
Tom Hass, ***Grower- Cherry Hill Orchards***
Gary Mount, ***Grower-Terhune Orchards***
Evan Milburn, ***Grower- Milburn Orchards***

Four outstanding growers from three states, New Jersey, Maryland and Pennsylvania spoke on a grower panel at the Mid-Atlantic Fruit and Vegetable Conference, Hershey PA in 2013. They shared their combined 170 years plus of sweet cherry cultivar knowledge with 150 other farmers.

Each grower was asked to address seven questions, I will list each question separate and list their responses.

1) ***Describe your orchard operation, location, acres, what do you grow, how do you market your cherries, etc.***

a. Weaver's Orchard - http://www.weaversorchard.com/. We are located in Morgantown Pa-Berks County. Our farm is around 100 acres: approximately 25 apple, 22 peach, 13 cherry (2A tarts), 5 other tree fruits, 12 berries, the remainder pumpkins, tomatoes asparagus etc. We have a Farm Market on the property open year round. We also do pick your own. Wholesale accounts for around 20% of our total sales.

b. Cherry Hill Orchards - http://www.cherryhillorchards.com/. We are located in Lancaster, PA 17603 Lancaster County. We grow 40 acres of peaches and nectarines. 40 acres of apples. 3 acres of plums and apricots 23 acres of cherries as well as sweet corn and face pumpkins. Our cherry ,peach and apples are all geared towards our pick your own customers needs. In addition we have an orchard outlet that offers our fruit ready picked and is open year around. Additionally, We ship apples to Hess Brothers Fruit Company and Knouse Foods as needed. We spot pick all our trees for maturity and color multiple times for peak flavor.

Jubileum tart cherry. Win Cowgill photo.

c. **Terhune Orchards -** http://www.terhuneorchards.com. Our farm is about 200 acres in Princeton, NJ. We are best known for apples, but grow 36 different crops--many varieties of each. We sell almost 100% direct marketing with some deliveries to restaurants in our area. Also included are greenhouse crops, including lettuce and flowers throughout the winter, bakery and winery--our latest venture. We have been pioneers in using farm festivals to promote the farm and sell our crops. All the land we farm is permanently preserved and we are pleased to have the next generation of our family committed to continuing the farm. We are recently working on succession and estate planning. We have two acres of cherries--first planting in 1996 with additions and replacements since then. We sell pick your own only-our crop is normally picked and sold in less than one day. A really large crop might take us into the next morning. With a small orchard, I would prefer to have all varieties ready to pick at the same time. So, Montmorency and Regina have marks against them for that--it is hard to keep pickers out of them even though they are not ready yet.

Sweeheart sweet cherry. Win Cowgill photo.

d. **Milburn Orchards -** http://www.milburnorchards.com/. Our farm is located in northeastern Md,outside the town of Elkton. Located 3 miles east of Delaware and 3 miles south of PA. We are extremely diversified with all kinds of tree fruit, table grapes and other small fruits. Marketing all this by all methods, plus entertainment farming. Of this 400 acres plus, 27 acres are planted to sweet cherries and a few tarts. 12 acres of these are 25 years old,the others were planted in 2010. All 27 acres are 95% PYO.

2) ***What are you favorite cherry varieties, sweet and tart if you grow them? Top ten max?***

a. **Weaver's Orchard --** In no particular order: Rainier, Benton (yield consistency?-replace w/ Ebony Pearl?), Regina (yield consistency is a big problem- not sure where that will lead), Attika (yield consistency? For now Hedelfingen, Skeena?), Sweetheart (but only in high tunnels as it cracks- very late), Sandra Rose (bad cracker, spring freeze?), Cavalier/Rynbrandt (replace w/ Black Pearl, maybe Kiona?), Royalton (Replace w/ Burgundy Pearl?), Balaton (tart), Montmorency (tart), and Jubileum (my personal favorite tart to eat is but I haven't proven it to be a sound winner yet!). There are freeze concerns based on 2010 and 2012: Summit-both years, Sandra Rose-both years, Black Gold-both years, Benton-both years, but less in 2010, Hartland-both years but less in 2012, Ulster-both years but less in 2010, and Hudson-both years but less in 2010. Many others had some damage, but these stood out.

b. **Cherry Hill Orchards --** Hedelfingen, Vernon, Summit, Emperor Francis, Rainier, Ebony,

Black Pearl, Burgundy Pearl, Black York, Attica, and Regina.

c. **Terhune Orchards --** Rainier is our favorite sweet. That is, it is our customer's favorite. We have 75% Asian pyo customers, and they just cannot get enough of a yellow blush cherry. We choose our picking date by when they will be ready. Montmorency is our tart; I thought they would be hard to sell, but they are very popular. We try to keep pickers out until the next weekend. Other favorites are: Somerset, Hartland, Chelan, and Schmidt. Regina and Lapins are poor for us -- they look good but do not taste good.

d. **Milburn Orchards --** Many varieties were planted in the older planting. Learning from these, only 6 varieties were chosen for the new planting in 2010: two whites and four reds, all early or mid-season. No more late ones were planted because of the falling prices the big chains charge for Washington cherries being shipped in that that time: our $3.50 vs their $0.99. For PYO people the red ones are of "the Bing family", the white ones are "the Rainier family." Galaxy is the only tart cherry planted, it ripening with the mid-season sweets. These are heavy producers on a semi-dwarfing, spreading tree. The earlier tart varieties have less production, and Montmorency is too late. These are my sweets in ripening order: Hartland (extremely productive, spreading tree, and a great pollinator; can be a cracker in rainy times), White Gold (I call it a smaller Rainier; great taste, great blush, great pollinator), Summit (HUGE, dark red, best taste, highly productive, no negatives), Van-del-lay (coal black, self fertile, sweet ripens with Summit, can over produce resulting with smaller cherries), Emperor Francis (an old standard white but best for this season), and Regina (BEST sweet grown on the east coast, dark red, long stems, crunchy, late bloomer, very little cracking; negatives are very vigorous tree making it hard to train and needs late blooming varieties for pollination; for pollination I wedged in trees of Gold and Black Gold at every eighth tree, in every row; it is not as productive as other varieties). Many, and I mean many, rootstocks and varieties are always planted in our test blocks. G.6 is and will be our chosen one for our needs. The only exception could be G.5 for the Regina.

Danube tart cherry. Win Cowgill photo.

3) ***What is the predominate rootstock you are growing on now? or which one do you like now or one that is promising and you will use more on future plantings.***

a. **Weaver's Orchard --** We have at least seven rootstocks on the farm. New plantings are mostly G.5 and G.6, and we are starting to evaluate G.3. As a general rule: these are heavy croppers (most self fertile varieties) go on G.6 and lighter croppers go on G.5. Location, soil vigor, desired tree height, and pruning methods can dramatically effect final tree size.

b. **Cherry Hill Orchards** -- Older trees are on Mazzard. Newer plantings are G. 5. We have some MxM and some Krymsk stocks. The G.5 works well for us, because they are self standing if they are kept open. We maintain the tree height at 8' by mechanical topping after harvest.

c. **Terhune Orchards** -- I plant all Gisela stocks. In 1994 and 1995 when I was ordering, they were called Gissen 148-1, 148-8, and 148-2. Then the names were changed to Gisela with a different numbering system, and I have been confused ever since. I have G.5, G.6, and G.7. G.7 is not sold anymore, because root suckering is a problem. G.5 is not my favorite, because it is too weak for heavy bearing and it results in small fruit, which are not a problem for pyo but are not as tasty as they could be. G.6 works well for me because of the heavy soil in the orchard site, and it has enough vigor to carry a crop. It is not as precocious and heavy bearing as I would like.

d. **Milburn Orchards** -- Many, and I mean many, rootstocks and varieties are always planted in our test blocks. G.6 is and will be our chosen one for our needs. The only exception could be G.5 for Regina.

Montmorency tart cherries. Rebecca Magron photo.

4) ***List of varieties that have tried and have not worked for you***

a. **Weavers Orchard** -- Sam, Schmidt, Early Robin, Sunset Bing, Royal Ann, Summit, Napolean, Ulster, Black Gold, Index, Chelan, Anderson, White Gold, and probably more.

b. **Cherry Hill Orchards** -- Sam, Stella, Lappins, Royal Anne, and Schmidt. Decay issues on self fruitful varieties as well as lousy flavor are problems.

c. **Milburn Orchards** -- Varieties no longer planted: Sam, Royalton, Somerset, Kristen, Vouge, Cavalier, Star, Vista, Lapins, Sweetheart, Bing, Rainer, and any other varieties bred on the West coast, including BC (with very few exceptions). All are extreme crackers in our climate. Some of these might be fine with high tunnels.

5) ***Grown in tunnels or outside?***

a. Weaver's Orchard -- We have approximately 3.5 acres in tunnels and 7 acres outside.
b. Cherry Hill Orchards -- All are planted outside.
c. Terhune Orchards -- I have Haygrove tunnels over the entire 2 acres. These were constructed after losing the entire crop one year when heavy rain for 4 days the week before harvest split every cherry so badly we never picked a single one. A tunnel is an absolutely necessary, in my opinion.
e. Milburn Orchards -- All 27 acres are planted outside.

6.) ***What type of production system, i.e. central leader, Spanish bush?***

a. Weavers Orchard -- Mostly a central leader type tree, that is, we use Weaver modified version of the Greg Lang/ Lynn Long pruning methods found on the website www.giselacherry.com. We have had some trees in almost every other system around: UFO, Bi-lateral, super spindle, modified Marchant, KGB, Spanish Bush, Tall open center, etc.
b. Cherry Hill Orchards -- Our trees are more toward a Spanish bush. Multiple leaders make canker management easier. We hand prune after harvest.
c. Terhune Orchards -- We use a central leader.
d. Milburn Orchards -- Although the new UFO system was real temping (one small row is in our experimental block), we chose the modified VOGEL system in our new plantings (google vogel cherry system). All are planted 8x16, stopped at 8-9 feet high, on ridges for fast growth. All are supported with a short post for the first 4-5 years. It is very labor intense for the first 5 years but is highly productive.

7.) ***How do you decide on new varieties to try?***

a. **Weaver Orchards --** We try almost everything.
b. **Cherry Hill Orchards --** Nursery and NY State recommendations.
c. **Terhune Orchards --** Plant more Rainier, but evaluate other crops first. I was going to remove an asparagus field (partly pyo) in order to plant more cherries. A pencil and paper showed me I was making more with asparagus.
d. **Milburn Orchards --** We maintain a test block of everything we can get out hands on!

Uncle Win's Baleton tart cherry pie. Win Cowgill photo.

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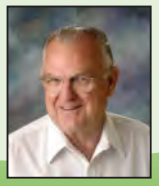
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