

GOOD FRUIT GROWER

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Skylar Rae cherries about a week before harvest. In tests, the soluble solids have been as high as 30° Brix.

Sweet Skylar Rae

Grieving family finds promising new cherry variety.

By Geraldine Warner

If you were designing the perfect cherry, you might want one that looks similar to Rainier, but brighter colored. It would ripen a couple of weeks earlier, to get a jump on the market. It would be sweeter than Rainier, yet with a good amount of acid to make it flavorful. It would be big and crisp, and, importantly, not susceptible to bruising.

A Wenatchee, Washington, family appears to have discovered such an unlikely cherry growing quite by chance in a block of Sweetheart cherries in their orchard.

Kimberly and Troy Toftness and her parents, Robert and Nancy Van Hoven, bought the ground for their orchard at Halverson Canyon from a family member a decade ago. Friends recommended cherries as a good crop to grow at their 2,800-foot elevation site. In 2002, they planted Sweetheart, Bing, and Rainier cherries. Troy, a pharmacist, recruited his father, Jack Toftness, a former miner, as orchard manager.

Four years ago, as the orchard began to come into production, Jack noticed that one of the trees in the Sweetheart block was distinctly different from the rest. In mid-July, while the Sweethearts were still sour and barely colored, one tree bore yellow fruit with a bright orange blush that were the sweetest cherries any of the family members or their neighbors had ever tasted.

Not self-fertile

They took some fruit to Jack Snyder at C & O Nursery in Wenatchee, who began rigorous testing to find out if the cherry was as special as it seemed. DNA tests at Washington State University showed that the new cultivar was not self-fertile, as Sweetheart is, and Snyder said the fruit has different characteristics from Rainier. The fruit matures in mid-July, about seven to ten days before Rainier.

A Wenatchee fruit-packing house ran quality tests on some of the fruit last year. Soluble solids ranged from 24 to 30° Brix, and the malic acid level averaged 0.679 percent, which is medium to high. Firmness ranged from 256 to 544 grams per millimeter. The size peaked on 10 and 10-1/2 row. And when the cherry was cut, the pale yellow flesh didn't turn brown, which Snyder thinks could be an indication that it is not prone to bruising—a great attribute for a yellow cherry.

"I'm trying to find out what its bad properties are," he said.



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Golden Delicious apple harvest
near Monitor, Washington

PHOTO BY JOHN

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What really impresses people is the eating quality, he added. Typically, they can't stop eating the cherries until they're gone.

The Toftness family knew immediately what to christen this special new cherry. In 2004, Kim and Troy's first child Skylar Rae was born with a congenital defect and lived for only 49 days. They felt that naming the cherry after their daughter, whom the family missed so dearly, would help keep her name and memory alive.

Through four years of testing, they had to keep their find a secret. Now that it is patented and the trademark is pending, they're eager to see Skylar Rae become a commercial variety. The family planted an acre of the new variety at their orchard last year and intends to plant more.

Hot climates

Snyder said he's testing the variety on different rootstocks and has trial plantings in areas with hot climates, such as Bakersfield, California, where Rainier typically goes into alternate bearing because of the heat. C & O intends to sell trees for commercial plantings in 2011.

Troy said Skylar Rae will not be a limited or managed variety, but will be available to anyone who wants to grow it. "We thought it was good enough, we wanted to put it out to everybody," he said.

Snyder believes that Skylar Rae has the potential to be an upgrade of the Rainier variety, in the same way that the Rosy Glow apple is being marketed as an improved Pink Lady.

"If this cherry is that firm, if it doesn't bruise, if it has this much sugar, and if the size turns out to be okay, then this could be a variety that could change Rainier as we know it today," he said. "I'm still evaluating it, but now it's time to let it go into the world and let others discover what good or bad habits it has."

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