

A Practical Perspective on Current Issues Affecting Production and Marketing of Organic Apples, Pears, and Cherries.

Harold T. Ostenson¹

Abstract

Production of organic tree fruits in Washington State will increase by 100% in the next two years to equal the organic tree fruit growth volume accomplished during the last twenty years. This rapid growth success is a product of the advancement in understanding organic horticulture practices and pest control options. Large organic orchard blocks of 200 hectares or more at a single location are now in production.

For the most part, this large scale organic commitment has been accomplished by utilizing farming practices as if these blocks were conventional, but farmed with certified 'organic amendments.' This is not unexpected because the farmers in most cases have a long history of conventional chemical use. The chemical company suppliers' backgrounds and experiences are conventionally based as well.

Researchers also contribute to this system of treating organics from a single aspect approach by evaluating an organic material in place of a conventional material for pest control, for example, and with much thoroughness, report on less efficacy of the organic material when compared to a conventional counterpart. Few organic researchers reach beyond their rather narrow comfort zone of their 'area of expertise,' leaving the task of grouping individual research efforts into some kind of meaningful 'systems approach' to organic to someone else. In most cases, that someone else is yet to be found.

Advancements in organic pest control 'modes of action,' the understanding of organic chemical fruit thinning options, and the ability to stimulate an organic environment to grow consistent volumes of high quality fruit in of itself requires a systems integrated approach to be successful and sustainable.

In 2006, our organic fruit packing operation supplied the organic market Golden Delicious apples from August 20th for one full year to the following August, a first, I believe, in the organic market. Newer storage technologies that support organic production requirements, such as Harvest Watch (Dynamic Controlled Atmosphere [DCA]), and MAP (Modified Atmosphere Packaging) techniques allow for much higher volumes of organic tree fruit to be available in the marketplace over significantly longer market windows with high consumer quality acceptance. Successfully understanding organic tree fruit growing practices coupled with storage quality indexes that match conventional storage technologies in capabilities are a necessary part of our discussion with the goal to have year long supplies of organic tree fruit at every grocery retail level.

¹ Organic Program Manager, Stemilt Growers, Inc., Wenatchee, Washington, US.