



Eastern apple growers cast wide net on sustainability

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Jim Offner

Eastern apple growers say there are probably as many approaches to sustainability as there are fruit growers, shippers and packers.

Some use comprehensive integrated pest management programs and apply chemical treatments more judiciously than before. Many watch water use carefully and recycle and use recycled materials.

The goal, the growers say, is to make the best use of the resources they use by making sure fruit they produce is purchased and consumed.

“There is no one thing you can do to be sustainable,” said Brian Nicholson, president of Geneva, N.Y.-based Red Jacket Orchards.

“You have to have a comprehensive approach to sustainability.”

Nicholson said his operation has achieved certification through the Portland, Ore.-based Food Alliance, which audits sustainability practices.

“We’re looking to start scoring a certified sustainable apple program, because we’re already a certified sustainable organization,” Nicholson said.

“We’re got about a year left for full certification. You’ve got to see all the areas they grade you on — how are you managing your people, your give-back to the community, the environment.”

Sustainability has blended well with another trend in produce — the locally grown movement, according to Jim Allen, president of the Fishers-based New York Apple Association.

“Very much so,” he said.

“We’re very fortunate that we are so close to three-quarters of the population, including Toronto down to Washington and Atlanta. That’s a huge population base, and it’s a great point to make at the point of sale.”

Judiciousness in chemical application is a focus for Wolcott, N.Y.-based Teeple Farms, owner John Teeple said.

“We employ spray consultants to minimize the number of sprays that we have to spray, so we’re not wasting energy or money or overspraying things,” he said.

“The boxes we’re using to put our apples in, a lot of us are going to a plastic box that we can use almost forever. They’re used at harvest.”

Plants across the industry are working on sustainability issues in their own ways, said Karin Rodriguez, executive director of the Pennsylvania Apple Marketing Program, Harrisburg.

“Specifically, a lot of packinghouses have integrated some energy-saving measures in their plants,” she said.

“Our apple marketing board funds research that’s constantly looking for more efficient ways to do things. Our program does support research that works toward sustainability and looks for innovative ways to run an orchard.”

Sustainability is in play from the top down at Rice Fruit Co., Gardners, Pa., said John Rice, president.

“When we built our last cold-storage addition, we put something that’s a little unusual in the trade: We put a green roof on it to minimize water runoff,” he said.

“What it looks like is a garden on top of the building. It’s potting soil and plants that absorb the water when it rains and the potting soil makes a good insulation for our controlled atmosphere rooms underneath. It’s something we take our visitors out to see and they’re impressed because it’s so big.”

The building holds about 400,000 bushels of apples, Rice said.

Everybody who is successful in agriculture does what they can to be greener, but there are limits, said David Benner, general manager of Fairfield, Pa.-based El Vista Orchards.

“If you’re operating a processing plant, you have your choices of recycling metal, wood, cans and wastewater, but when you’re farming, you really can’t get into a lot of those programs,” he said.

“We collect our cans and plastic bottles and recycle them. We do land management or some good soil conservation practices, as far as maintaining sod on hillsides. We use water diligently and efficiently, as far as irrigation. I wish we had more, but we don’t. It’s not a question that your average farmer can contribute a lot of information to. Now, what we do is very important, but it’s not like we can make a whole list of a lot of programs.”

But what the company can do to be more sustainable, it does, he said.

“We’re upgrading the equipment, which makes operation more efficient, if you will,” Benner said.

“A lot of the new tractors and sprayers we’re getting have the new emissions technology and the new computer technology to help ... not use any more fuel than we need.

“But when you’re harvesting 8,000 bushels of apples a day and it’s September and they’re 85 degrees and you’re trying to get ‘em down to 32, it takes electrical power.”

Benner said his company powers irrigation systems during off-peak hours when possible.

“One of the things we do is our trickle irrigation, where we’re running electric motors, but as opposed to run them during the daytime peak hours, we try to run them at night,” he said.

“I don’t know if it saves us any money or not, but it helps out in general. It’s something nice to do. It takes demands off peak hours in the afternoon and helps somebody.”

Sustainability initiatives at Wolcott, N.Y.-based Fowler Bros. Inc. are “a laundry list,” according to Lee Peters, vice president of sales/marketing.

"In one of our buildings, we just replaced all the lighting with high-efficiency systems and (it) will be a tremendous savings on power. We've gone to a bliss box, which saves approximately 54% of what we used to use for corrugated (packaging)," he said.

"A bliss box is a corrugated box that uses much less fiber. As a result, you can transport more and use less fuel. It takes less energy to make the box. It has inner strength, which is good."

In Timberville, Va., Turkey Knob Apples Inc. has several initiatives in place, said Jamie Williams, president of the company, which is the marketing arm of Bowman Fruit Sales LLC.

"We've seen it coming over the years and one of the things we're doing is putting cover crops over vacant orchards and letting them stay in a rotation about two or three years before we get back into them," he said.

"That has become a big deal.

"We're also chopping brush up in place instead of removing the brush and either burning them or disposing them in another way. We're using brush choppers to create mulch in the orchard."

Orchard managers also watch their use of sprays, Williams said.

"On the IPM program, we're hitting in the bug traps," he said.

"We've got someone inspecting the traps to determine where we have to spray and where we don't have to spray.

"If we're not catching the bugs, we're not having to spray as much, therefore reducing our carbon footprint and saving us some money."