SOME things you’ll never forget... It was a steamy July morning in 1977 out in a peach orchard in Oxley, Ontario, Canada. I had just begun my first, full-time summer job working for $2.15 an hour. I was excited — I had begun saving for that motorcycle I’d buy on my 16th birthday! At 14 years of age, I was learning how to work hard. Covered in sweat, dust, and itchy peach fuzz, swatting at mosquitoes, and getting used to the unfamiliar picking harness and heavy half-bushel basket swinging around my waist, I could hear and see it. Rattle-bang, rattle-pop, it sounded as it came down the dirt road with a cloud of dust behind it.

The crusty old man got out of his rusty “farm only” pickup and proceeded over to the trees where my school buddies and I were picking. Peter Welacky, Sr., was a Hungarian immigrant to Canada. He and his son owned and managed this local orchard. The “old man” (noted with respect here — he’s long since passed on) came to check on the progress of the new picking crew and to examine the results of their few hours of labor. I was watching as he went from basket to basket and picker to picker — like a drill sergeant interrogating new privates at boot camp. It was a fearful thing! “Peejuhn-eggs! Peejuhn-eggs!” he yelled as he went through several baskets and removed specific fruits and threw them on the ground. One basket, he completely dumped out on the ground. My buddies and I stood there stunned and speechless. In his broken English and based on his strong body language, it was obvious that he was not happy. We came to realize that “Peejuhn-eggs” was his way of telling us that many of the peaches we had picked were immature and too small — like the eggs laid by a pigeon. Before he abruptly returned to his truck and headed back to the roadside market he managed, he reminded us of what type of fruit he wanted us to pick (size, color, etc.). We had been humbled and instructed, and a valuable life lesson was learned.

It makes a difference, doesn’t it, when your customers come to you directly to buy the fruit you grow — when they can look you in the eye and touch, smell, and even taste what you are selling? It makes a difference, doesn’t it, when they associate your name with quality and reliability and they keep coming back for more and more? It makes a difference, doesn’t it, when they tell their neighbors and friends about the delicious fruit coming from your stand? It makes a difference, doesn’t it, when the buying parents bring fresh fruit home and their children devour it and ask for more?

Peter Welacky, Sr. understood the difference that we, as inexperienced peach pickers, had not yet fully grasped. He was a humble, local businessman and word-of-mouth referrals and repeat customers was the name of the game. His farm had no Facebook page or Twitter feed. He wasn’t writing a regular blog and they had no fancy website or online catalogue. Neither did they have a glossy promotion program, but they had peaches, and when picked tree-ripe, handled carefully, and displayed nicely, they would literally sell themselves. It did not hurt either to have several cute, smiling, friendly local high school girls peddling the fruit at his stand.

Almost 36 years later, I haven’t forgotten that lesson and others I learned at Mr. Welacky’s farm. Since that time, I have had the privilege to travel and teach in many states and countries and
to interact with fruit growers managing small and enormous farms and everything in between. I’ve eaten some delicious fruit but also tossed plenty in the trash after only one bite. How about you? The lesson bears repeating — fruit quality matters. It matters to the consumer. It matters to the bottom line of the producer. Why do you think that the Honeycrisp apple (aka “Moneycrisp” as one Washington grower told me recently) can fetch up to $100 a box? Is it a fad or simply a great tasting apple?

The idiom “fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me” is played out time and again as fruit-buying customers all over the world are duped by attractive fruit in the chain store that has no juice, no taste, no aroma. Fruit that is immature, hard, green, internally bruised, mealy with internal break-down, etc. In some cases, it may be overripe, too! They should not be passing over apples, pears, cherries, peaches, plums, and apricots and buying only bananas because they were disappointed in the former — for a second time!

**Quality Matters To Everyone**

Whether you are shipping Washington grown red pears to Dalian, China, for the first time with the hopes of taking a foothold in a new market, or you are selling tree-ripened apricots at a local farmers’ market in central California, quality matters. Whether you are selling year-old, cold-stored and MCP-treated apples to the big chain stores for U.S. distribution, or you are selling peaches at the roadside market in Chesnee, SC, quality matters.

While raising my four children, I used a particular phrase regularly in our home: “junk in, junk out.” The point to my kids was that the “stuff” we feed our eyes/mind/heart with makes a difference in the way we live. If I feed on worthless things, I won’t have much, if anything, to give or share with others or to contribute to society. That same phrase applies to fruit growing and marketing. A fruit picked at incorrect maturity (too early or too late) — even if it is pretty and manipulated in various ways — will likely be an unpleasant eating experience. If it needs to stay longer on the tree, leave it there. If an inexperienced picker put it in the basket, bag, or bin, grade it out and discard it. Junk is junk. Fruit that is indecipherable is junk.

Most fruit growers I know genuinely care about the quality of the product they are selling and the satisfaction of the customer. While our complex worldwide food distribution chain may put a piece of fruit from a tree picked 12 months ago into the hands of a customer today, that same system may put a piece of fruit that was picked too early or too late into the hands of a customer that is several thousand miles away. The further removed the grower and the customer are from each other both in time and space, the greater the potential there is for error and failure and disappointment. As I noted in my first paragraph, however, even if the fruit is picked from the tree and sold directly to the customer the same day, it could still be disappointing to the customer if it was picked too early or too late.

As you consider your fruit operation for 2013 and beyond, may I encourage you to evaluate your company’s “fruit quality” pledge to your customers. Would the fruit they buy from you meet the same standard you would hold if that fruit was destined for eating by your wife, child, grandchild, boss, or next door neighbor? If your answer is yes, good on ya! Keep up the good work. If not, why not raise the bar? Put in place higher quality control standards. Let me know if I can help. Let’s keep them coming back for more.

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