



By Mike Knowles

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Fruitbox 29 – How to manage the volatile cherry category



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Huge opportunities and big risks are combining to create one of the most exciting categories in the produce business

Matt Hancock and Will Wolmer both see huge opportunities to grow the market for cherries.

The managing directors respectively of British cherry importer and distributor Norton Folgate and Hampshire-based producer Blackmoor Estate were speaking to Chris White during the latest episode of Fruitnet's conversation series Fruitbox.

They admitted that achieving the potential growth they can see ahead will depend on them effectively managing one of the most volatile product categories in the fresh produce business, as well as finding a way to have fruit in the market all year round.

One of the biggest challenges, says Hancock, is securing sufficient 12-month supply. "As a business we're now selling cherries for 46 weeks of the year and the last six weeks are going to be the real tough nut to crack as an industry."

The opportunities though are huge. "Look at what happened to blueberries. When they got to 52-week supply on a regular basis with decent volume, the business overnight virtually quadrupled. The cost to the business of not having cherries at the moment is enormous."

For Wolmer, improving the UK's domestic crop during the past few years has required investment and expertise. "Fruit growing is always going to be challenging," he explains. "But there are certain aspects of the way we grow cherries now that take away some, if not all, of the risks to do with the weather."

Better grading technology, for example, has enabled British cherry growers to provide some of the larger supermarket customers with a more dependable supply line, as well as opening up access to export markets. New and better varieties too are making a difference.

"I think generally there's been a shift

towards the darker, larger, firmer cherries – particularly the ones that have come historically out of Canada," Wolmer notes. "Those are the ones customers seem to want and those are the ones we can grow particularly well. They allow us to extend our season a little bit later."

For Hancock, the cherry industry's volatility is what draws him to it. "The changes in weather and markets, the ups and downs are what keep it interesting," he says. "We've got some big opportunities at the moment with new varieties and new orchards going in, and new ways of growing cherries. Cherries in general are quite an exciting space to be in."

Hosted by Chris White in London, Fruitbox now attracts a big audience across the global fruit and vegetable business that tunes in twice a week to hear exclusive interviews and expert analysis.

Produced by Fruitnet Media International, the show is essential listening for everyone in the fresh produce industry.

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