

In its fifth generation, Symms Fruit Ranch thrives

By **HEATHER SMITH THOMAS**
For the Capital Press

This family orchard operation began in 1914 as an 80-acre homestead with 8 acres of fruit trees. It now grows more than 25 varieties of fruit on 5,200 acres, making it one of the top 100 fruit growers and packers in the U.S.

Sally Symms, vice president of sales and marketing, says the original farm was homesteaded by her great-great-grandfather.

"It has grown with each generation. I am the first person in the fifth generation working in the family business," she says. Currently, the third and fourth generations are still involved.

Climate in this hillside region overlooking the Snake River is perfect for fruit.

"One of the reasons we are so successful in growing tree fruits is our micro climate. Summers are hot during the day and cool in the evenings. Heat during the day helps the acid content in the fruit rise, and cool nights bring out the sugar," she explains. This makes a perfect balance for flavor and optimum ripening.

"We usually pack between 125,000 and 150,000 cartons of cherries each season, 15,000 cartons of apricots, 500,000 cartons of peaches and smaller quantities of nectarines and plums," she says. "Apples vary,



Courtesy of the Symms Fruit Ranch
Jamie Mertz, Sally Symms and Dar Symms are seen at their family farm in the Sunny Slope area near Caldwell, Idaho.

depending on the variety."

They market fruit all across the country and do a lot of export business, especially for the apples, she says.

"During September through November we send a lot of fruit to Central America and Scandinavia," she says. "They buy apples for Christmas. We also export a lot of cherries and white peaches to Asian markets."

It takes special packing and shipping to get fruit to its destination in perfect condition.

"With cherries we try to ship within 48 hours from the time they are picked. Cherries are picked and packed the same day and the men in the sales office make sure we find a home for them within 24 hours to make sure the fruit is handled properly and still fresh when it

Symms Fruit Ranch

Owners: Symms family

Since: 1914

Location: Sunny Slope area near Caldwell, Idaho

Growing: 5,200 acres of apples, cherries, peaches, plums, nectarines, pears, wine grapes

arrives for the customer," she says.

"Some of the varieties for the Asian market, like cherries and white peaches, are such a treat for them that those customers pay to have it air freighted," she says. "These fruits arrive at their destination within 72 hours of being picked from the trees."

"I manage our inventory and make sure we are selling and moving it in a timely fashion," she says.

Today, five family members

are involved in the business. Jim Mertz and Dick Symms are the third generation, the fourth generation is Dar Symms and Jamie Mertz, and Sally is the fifth.

Seasonal help is used for various tasks such as taking care of the trees and picking. The orchards are spread over this hillside region within a 20-mile radius.

"Over the past 100 years we've been able to grow and keep moving forward," she says.

Sally grew up here, helping pick cherries and working in the warehouse as a summer job. Then for six years after graduating from University of Idaho she worked in the fashion industry.

"I entered the family business a year and a half ago, which was a career shift, but the timing was just right for me to come back closer to home and work with my family. I really enjoy being in the agriculture produce business," she says.

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