

Researcher investigates less labor-intensive cherry systems

By DENISE RUTTAN
For the Capital Press

An Oregon State University horticulturist is developing improved cherry varieties on rootstock in combination with training systems that reduce the size of the trees and thus require less labor.



Lynn Long



Courtesy of Lynn Long

These cherry trees have been grown using a training system that allows them to be harvested from the ground.

researchers have investigated the performance of three main types of these training systems.

One of these training systems was developed by Washington State University and is called the Upright Fruiting Offshoots system, known more commonly by the slightly spacier term, the UFO training system. This system involves training the trees on a wide trellis.

“It’s a system where no branch hangs down, and it’s an upright system so that it has a free fall for the fruit,” Long

said. “If a branch is shaken, fruit can come down into a catch basin without impacting the quality of the fruit. This is one of the systems developed to be able to automate the harvest. We looked at machines to help automation of the harvest and consumer acceptance of cherries picked with machines.”

The harvest can be automated to a great extent, but it depends on the training system, Long said. Fruit quality is imperative for cherry growers, so a cherry dropping from the tree cannot be bruised and battered.

Lynn Long, based in Wasco County, said the research has its roots in a historical trajectory. In the 1970s, cherry orchards consisted of giant trees commonly harvested on 22-foot ladders. Fast forward to the 1990s, when growers began utilizing shorter, more densely growing trees. What is new is the ever-shrinking labor pool, which has driven growers to become more interested in dwarfing rootstocks and increasingly dense orchards.

“We wanted to try to reduce the amount of time it took to pick an acre of cherries,” Long said. “By doing this, we relieve some of the pressure on growers to find pickers who may not be there in the future.”

Part of why workers are so hard to come by has to do with the labor intensive nature of the harvest of this particular crop. To pluck a juicy, ripe cherry from a bushy branch, workers must typically climb a tall ladder to reach them.

“When you put pickers on ladders, it reduces their productivity by almost half,” Long said. “They have to set up the ladder, climb up the ladders, and reach for the fruit. Ladders increase the potential for accidents because pickers have to be higher off the ground. Pickers having both feet on the ground increases their productivity and reduces the risks for both the worker and the grower.”

Training the tree to a shorter height means growers use less labor. So Long and other



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