

Tyler's Rocky Point Orchard comes back from disasters

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

The Tyler family is currently rebuilding their orchard near Emmett, Idaho, after severe losses caused by recent cold winters and fire.

"I bought the ground in 1994 and part of it was already an orchard," says Rob Tyler, a pharmacist. The orchard is a hobby that became a second career.

Rob didn't grow up on a farm but his great-grandfather had Crystal Springs Orchard near Buhl, Idaho.

"My dad grew up there, and I used to go there with my grandmother when I was a little kid in the early 1950s to pick fruit. My dad loved the orchard,

and my granddad could graft anything," he says.

"My son Scott likes to graft different varieties. We started with Red and Golden Delicious, then Scott grafted all kinds of apples onto some of those trees," he says. "Now we have Jonagolds, Fujis and trees with two or three different kinds of apples growing on them."

However, the past few years have been challenging.

In 2014 the area had a mild fall — until the end of November.

"Our trees still had green leaves; they had not gone dormant," he says. "It went from 60 degrees to 7 below zero overnight and froze the sap



Heather Thomas/For the Capital Press

Rob Tyler, his wife, Lynn, and their son Scott, left, have been in the orchard business since 1994. The Tylers are rebuilding their orchard after severe losses from unseasonable freezes and wildfire.

under the bark, killing most of them."

Though there were still some with a little life and they are carving out the dead parts to graft new growth on them, they also have new trees ordered.

"We had 600 cherry trees and lost 400. We had about 450 plum trees and now have about 50. We had 100 peach trees, now down to 30. We had 550 apple trees, 25 apricot trees and 25 pluots (a hybrid plum-apri-

cot), but lost some of them, too."

The pluot is a purple fruit that looks like a plum, but ripens the same time as an apricot. Pluots are firm and sour, and get sweeter after they are picked.

"They continue to ripen after picking, whereas cherries do not. You want cherries to ripen on the tree before you pick them. Peaches and apricots ripen a little more after they are picked, and so will plums," he

says.

"We had four varieties of plums, including Empress plums, which are huge — 3 to 4 inches long, 2 inches thick and tear-shaped," he says. "We also had friar, a Japanese variety and very sweet and tasty with yellowish meat. We had a simka plum with red meat — a very good plum and my favorite. We lost almost all of our friar plums and will have to replace them."

The orchard had many varieties of cherries before the freeze — Bing, Chelan, Attika, Lambert and Rainier.

"The Rainiers are mostly yellow with a red blush, and very crunchy. They don't really taste like a cherry but are very sweet and good, firm and crunchy with great texture. Restaurants use them to garnish a salad or fruit cocktail because they look so good," he says. "We have a few Sweethearts and some Early Robin cherries, which are similar to a Rainier."

Part of the orchard met with more bad luck when a wildfire struck.

"During the fire last summer firefighters dumped fire retardant on those trees and we lost

them. We had a horrible year, between the freezing and the fire," Rob says.

The bad luck continued.

"We had a beautiful bunch of peaches, put them in the cooler, and then the cooler went on the fritz and froze them all!" he says.

Mother Nature killed the apricots.

"We had a huge crop coming on; it warmed up in February last year, the trees bloomed early and the apricots came on thick. Then in April the temperature dropped into the teens and froze them."

The fruit is now marketed mostly via U-pick.

"In the Boise Valley there are many ethnic groups who had their own orchards in the Ukraine or Bosnia, wherever they came from, so they like to come pick their own," Rob says.

"We get lots of customers from India, Vietnam, Japan. ... it's like the United Nations around here in the summer. There are people in burkas, Russian dress and other native clothes — plus a lot of people from Boise who just drive over to pick," he says.



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