



Courtesy of Lance Kirk
Independence, Ore., hazelnut grower Lance Kirk is president of the Oregon Hazelnut Society.

Industry leader sees bright future for hazelnut growers

By JAN JACKSON
For the Capital Press

Lance Kirk is predicting a banner year for Oregon's hazelnut industry.

Elected president of the Oregon Hazelnut Society last winter, Kirk is a long-time Independence, Ore., hazelnut grower.

"It's an exciting time for this industry," Kirk said. "We have so many new growers planting orchards and the attendance at the winter meeting told us they are looking for as much information as they can get to help them."

OHS, which doesn't buy or sell nuts, is the education arm of the industry, he said. "At the speed with which Oregon State University is working on improving both varieties and methods of growing hazelnuts, everyone wants to know what's going on."

Kirk, a third-generation hazelnut grower, grew up on his parents' farm in Independence. He attended Cascade High School and holds a degree in general agriculture from Oregon State University.

"Grandpa got us started in the hazelnut business in the early 1980s," he said. "We started raising hops and hazelnuts, though we no longer

raise hops."

He left the farm and worked 17 years for ag supplier Wilbur-Ellis.

"But when I had an opportunity to return to the farm and raise a family, I took it," Kirk said. "I have 14-year-old twin boys who right now are more interested in basketball than what they see as farmwork, but I have hope that they may be interested in carrying on some day."

Kirk, who sells to George Packing Co. in Newburg, built a processing plant and is a receiving station for growers from Salem south to Eugene.

He is optimistic about the future.

"Our industry seems big to us, but if we want to get our product into Hershey and other products, our volume is going to have to increase dramatically," Kirk said. "I think we are going to see it climb as soon as this year. I'm encouraged when I see new orchards everywhere, off back roads and I-5. The new acres planted over eight years ago are already maturing so we should see an increase in production very soon."

When asked about the prospects of the new hardy varieties Rutgers University is hoping will bring hazelnuts

back to the East Coast, Kirk believes that will help Oregon growers as well.

He pointed out that many people there don't even know what hazelnuts are. When eastern farmers start growing them again, people will start using the nuts in many more different recipes and products, increasing demand.

In addition to Kirk and Sons Hazelnuts, he is a consultant, works with the bargaining association and hosts Summer Ag Institute teacher farm visits.

"I'm optimistic about the industry and all the new growers, though I wasn't prepared for the record-breaking attendance at the OHS winter meeting," he said. "I did realize my lucky streak ran out when I realized after successfully avoiding public speaking all through high school and college I was going to have to speak to 900 growers in January.

"The good news is, all of those enthusiastic growers bodes well for the hazelnut industry in Oregon."

Online

For more information on the Oregon Hazelnut Society, visit www.oregonnuts.org.



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