

People & Places

From one sweet job to another

Per McCord will spread out cherry harvest with new varieties

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

PROSSER, Wash. — Per McCord was a bit of an innovator in expanding use of DNA markers to breed new sugarcane varieties in Florida. Now he plans to do the same sort of thing in sweet cherries in Washington.

McCord joined the Washington State University Irrigated Agriculture Research and Extension Center in Prosser last April as an associate professor of horticulture and stone fruit breeder.

He quickly noticed the cherry industry was eager for his arrival. A key part of the job is breeding new cherry varieties, and the position had been vacant for two years.

Sweet cherries are a highly perishable crop. The Northwest crop is harvested in June, July and August and has been at 20 million, 20-pound boxes or more in seven of the last 10 years. Prices tend to tank in July at the highest sustained volume.

Growers commonly call it the “Gebbers glut” for the large production of Gebbers Farms in Brewster, Wash., the state’s largest cherry grower.

New varieties

The solution, industry leaders say, is better early and late season varieties to spread out harvest.

“The industry wants earlier and better cherries than the Chelan variety and later and better cherries than Sweetheart,” says Norm Gutzwiler, a Wenatchee cherry grower and commissioner on the Washington State Fruit Commission. He’s also on the Washington



Per McCord, Washington State University cherry breeder, plants seeds from this year’s cherry crosses at the Irrigated Agriculture Research and Extension Center in Prosser, Wash., on Nov. 16.

Tree Fruit Research Commission’s cherry research advisory committee.

The industry wants an early variety more rain resistant than Chelan and cherries of large size, good firmness and sugar content at both ends to “spread harvest so we don’t have a huge amount in three weeks in July not being sold at preferable margins for growers,” Gutzwiler said.

He said he thinks McCord understands that and will move in the right direction.

McCord said he has no problem working with the industry.

Being responsive

“I think you’ve got to be responsive to your stakeholders, especially if they are providing funding for some of your work,” McCord said. “You have to meet their expectations but at the same time you have a responsibility to all taxpayers

and your own research interests but they are not mutually exclusive. It doesn’t put you in a corner,” he said.

A top goal, he said, is to develop new blush and mahogany cherry varieties to extend the front and back ends of the crop. He’s already done some targeted crosses and is working to improve a data base for breeding management. He wants to organize it to more easily see how a potential new variety is performing, look at how often the same parents are used and evaluate existing crosses.

There was a three- to four-year break in crosses being made and it takes years to develop new varieties, he said.

“Everyone understands it takes time, but we have to be moving forward,” Gutzwiler said.

“I don’t want to say it’s easy, but it’s possible to breed for large, firm fruit that tastes

good,” McCord said. “A lot of it is genetics but it’s also how you grow it, the horticultural side.”

It’s generally best to breed for your environment, he said. In other words, breeding in the Pacific Northwest should be for varieties suited for the region.

He’s also interested in working on apricots.

Exciting work

McCord was one of eight children and when he was about 6 years old gained a love of plants from his grandmother.

“She always had a garden and lived close by. She made it seem like an exciting thing to work with plants,” he said. She died in October at age 94.

He was drawn to genetics in high school and college.

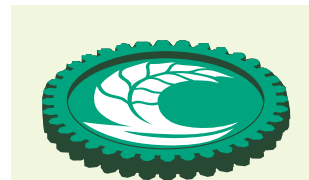
“It breaks the biology down into parts that have a name and you can understand. And when you put it together it’s a wonderful creative process but underneath it are distinct fits,” he said. “There is a gene or group of genes driving what you see.”

His work at the USDA Agriculture Research Service sugarcane field station in Canal Point, Fla., was developing new disease resistant, higher yielding varieties.

“The life of a sugarcane variety is not all that long. It depends, but it can be 10 to 20 years and yields decline due to disease pressure,” McCord said. “It’s a high-value crop, but the margins are not as great as they are for tree fruit.”

His work with DNA markers in breeding sugarcane, alfalfa and potatoes gives him a broader perspective, he said, more ability to look at things from more angles.

“By using DNA markers to chose your parents, you have a higher proportion of offspring that will have the desired gene or trait. It increases the chances of getting what you are looking



Western Innovator

Per McCord

Born: Portland, raised in Seaside, Ore.

Occupation: Associate professor of horticulture and stone fruit breeder at WSU Irrigated Agriculture Research and Extension Center since April 1.

Family: A wife and five children.

Education: Bachelor’s degree in plant genetics and breeding, Brigham Young University, 2000. Master’s in 2005 and doctorate in 2009, both in horticulture, North Carolina State University.

Work History: Research geneticist with USDA AARS sugarcane field station in Canal Point, Fla., 2012-2018. Post-doctorate researcher USDA AARS in Prosser, alfalfa genetics, 2010 to 2012; potato breeding and genetics, 2009-2010.

for,” McCord said.

“Breeding is a numbers game and you are basically stacking the deck when you do that,” he said.

He was looking to get back to the Northwest when he saw the job opening in Prosser.

“I liked working in sugarcane. I like to say it was a sweet job, but it was really far from our family and expensive to travel,” he said. “I wasn’t expecting a job opening back in Prosser, but when I saw it I saw it as an answer to prayer and went for it.”

Sugarcane. Sweet cherries. Sweet jobs.

OSU Extension’s poultry specialist sees 31 years of change

By JAN JACKSON
For the Capital Press

SALEM, Ore. — When James Hermes came to Oregon State University’s poultry department 31 years ago, big company buyouts, cage-free egg production and stringent antibiotic restrictions were not issues.

Today, as enters his last full academic year as Oregon State University Extension’s poultry specialist, Hermes is dealing with all three.

Born in North Carolina, Hermes earned an associate’s degree in science from Palomar Community College and bachelor’s and master’s degrees in avian sciences and a Ph.D. in genetics in 1988 from the University of California-Davis.

“I was originally interested in hawks and then game birds instead of chickens but I couldn’t get into graduate school with hawks and there was no significant employment (related to) game birds,” Hermes said. “Because of that, I got involved in what



After 30-plus years, Oregon State University Extension poultry specialist James Hermes has seen a lot of changes in the industry.

at the time was called poultry husbandry. I changed my major from zoology to avian science, got my degree in hatchery work and incubation and came to Oregon State as an extension agent and then specialist.”

He spends 80 percent of his time teaching and 20 percent advising growers, judging contests and leading workshops on the OSU Extension side. He is currently

participating in a three-year pastured poultry program with UC-Davis.

As fewer, larger companies raise chickens in Oregon, the business has changed, he said.

“My ties with the chicken business are reduced, partly because of my job and partly because the chicken people don’t meet any more,” Hermes said.

The switch to cage-free

operations by 2025 will also be challenging, he said.

“The cage-free deadline is going to be a tough one to meet because it is very expensive to changeover,” he said. Current cage facilities can’t be modified, he said, so existing buildings are going to have to be pushed down and rebuilt.

“Each company has its own schedule and everyone is doing a little bit — 10 percent the first year, 20 percent the second year and so on,” he said. “At a cost of \$40 to \$50 a bird and you have a million birds, we obviously are going to be paying more for eggs.”

Restrictions on antibiotics is another change poultry farmers face, he said.

“As to what’s going to happen now with new restrictions on the use of pharmaceuticals, is anybody’s guess. We don’t know what will happen when these egg layers are put on the floor and/or outside where they will be subjected to parasites and bacteria that have never challenged their immune systems before,” he said. “We are definitely in a transition period

and we’re going to have to do things differently. My veterinarian friends tell me the new learning curve is going to be steep.”

It remains to be seen who will take over Hermes’ OSU Extension duties and work with 4-H and FFA students and judge contests at the state fair when he retires with plans to raise his beloved game birds at the end of 2019.

“I have a small farm outside of Philomath where I can build pens for up to 1,000 pheasants, chuckers and other games birds if I decide to do that,” Hermes said. “My wife may shoot me because she’s not looking forward to spending our retirement tied to the farm. Hopefully, I can hire some willing students to pitch in so we can get away. After that, it will be helping my daughters get over not being on duty in the chicken booth when Ag Fest rolls around.”

For more information, contact OSU Department of Animal Rangeland Sciences at 541-737-2254 or email james.hermes@oregonstate.edu

Calendar

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Tuesday-Thursday Dec. 4-6

86th Oregon Farm Bureau Annual Meeting. Hilton San Diego Bayfront, San Diego, Calif. The California Farm Bureau’s 100th annual meeting. Website: http://cfbf.com/storage/app/media/am_assets/2018_AM_RegForm.pdf

Idaho Farm Bureau Annual Meeting. Boise. Idaho Farm Bureau members gather to learn about and discuss

items pertaining to agriculture. A session is convened with delegates making policy coming from resolutions that generated from the grassroots of the membership. The delegates also vote for officers of the Idaho Farm Bureau Federation Board.

Tuesday-Friday Dec. 4-7

California Farm Bureau Annual Meeting. Hilton San Diego Bayfront, San Diego, Calif. The California Farm Bureau’s 100th annual meeting. Website: http://cfbf.com/storage/app/media/am_assets/2018_AM_RegForm.pdf

Wednesday, Dec. 12

Mid-Columbia CORE Pesticide Training. 9:30 a.m.-3 p.m. Columbia Gorge Community College Lecture Hall, Building 2, The Dalles, Ore. Morning topics include glyphosate, triolopyr and risk assessments. Afternoon topics include an update on laws and regulations and case studies and lessons learned. 4 pesticide

credits are available. The class will satisfy CORE requirements or can be taken for 4 additional credits. Lunch will not be provided. Pre-registration is required. Cost: \$15 Website: <http://extension.oregonstate.edu/wasco>

Thursday-Friday Jan. 10-11

69th Annual Oregon Mint Growers Meeting. Salishan Resort, 7760 US-101, Gleneden Beach, Ore. Attendees will hear the latest on the mint industry. Pesticide recertification credits have been applied for. Website: oregonmint.org

Friday-Wednesday Jan. 11-16

2019 American Farm Bureau Federation Convention and IDEA Trade Show. Ernest N. Morial Convention Center, 900 Convention Center Blvd., New Orleans, La. The Farm Bureau’s annual national meeting. Website: www.fb.org/events/afbf-annual-convention/

Wednesday-Friday Jan. 16-18

Northwest Ag Show. Oregon State Fair & Exposition Center, 2330 17th St. NE, Salem, Ore. The 49th edition will focus on the emerging trends in the ag industry such as small farming, technology and education. It will provide useful information to attendees regarding equipment, best practices, job training and state-sanctioned certifications as well as legal and financial issues facing all farmers. Cost: \$5; \$3 for seniors; free for children under 12. Website: northwestagshow.com

Thursday, Jan. 17

Oregon Seed Association Mid-Winter Meeting. 7 a.m.-6:30 p.m. Best Western Premier Boulder Falls Inn, 505/605 Mullins Drive, Lebanon, Ore. The one-day event consists of committee and general member meetings, workshops and includes lunch. Scholarship awards are presented to eligible applicants. The day concludes with an evening reception to honor past association presidents.

Website: <http://www.oregonseed.org/events>

Wednesday-Saturday Jan. 23-26

39th Annual EcoFarm Conference. Asilomar Conference Grounds, 800 Asilomar Ave., Pacific Grove, Calif. The Ecological Farming Association (EcoFarm) presents the 39th annual EcoFarm Conference, featuring over 70 workshops, intensives, keynote speakers, an exhibitor marketplace, seed swap, live entertainment, mixers and organic culinary fare. Workshops cover practical information on crop production, livestock, soil health, marketing and distribution, social justice and cutting-edge information to help farmers succeed. As the oldest and largest organic farming event in the West, EcoFarm Conference is a prime networking and educational hub for farmers, ranchers, distributors, retailers, activists, researchers, and educators. Website: www.eco-farm.org/conference

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