

Thomas Orchards: A family affair

Jeff Thomas is 'cautiously optimistic' about the 2021 fruit crop

By STEVEN MITCHELL
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KIMBERLY — Jeff Thomas of Thomas Orchards is “cautiously optimistic” about this year’s crop.

The third-generation farmer, whose family orchard sits beside the John Day River in Kimberly, said that with months to go before the 2021 harvest, so much can go “good or bad.”

He and his family grow various fruits for picking, packing and canning that they distribute across the Northwest, including cherries, apricots, peaches, nectarines, apples, pears and plums. The family has a retail fruit stand and a “you-pick” side as well.

“We’re starting to see some apricots bloom,” Thomas said. “And peaches and cherries will come toward the end of March or the first part of April, and then apples come on toward mid to late April. But you get one cold night in April, and six hours can wipe away hundreds of millions of dollars.”

Although the Thomases have a frost protection system, “at the end of the day, Mother Nature wins.”

LOOKING BACK AT 2020

Despite all of the typical planting and harvesting challenges, not to mention a pandemic, 2020 was not a bad year for the orchard, Thomas said.

“Quality was good,” he said. “I guess people still want fresh produce come summertime. You saw that in the sales.”

He said apples were down quite a bit overall. But on the “you-pick” and retail side of the businesses, sales were up quite a bit.

Sales increased considerably at the start of the pandemic, a trend Thomas attributes primarily to people being concerned about



Blue Mountain Eagle/File Photo

The entrance to Thomas Orchards near Kimberly, in Grant County.



Angel Carpenter/Blue Mountain Eagle

Jeff Thomas at work in his family's fruit orchards.



Tanni Wenger Photography

The Thomas family.



Contributed Photo

Jeff Thomas's grandfather and father.



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A row of young fruit trees at Thomas Orchards.