

Quote: Niagara has always been known for the falls, but the juicy cherries and the sweet, ripe peaches are what keep the consumers coming back.

Niagara's Bounty—The Tender Fruit Industry in Ontario

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INTRODUCTION

The tender fruit industry in Niagara, also known as the “banana belt,” is located along the south shoreline of Lake Ontario in the province of Ontario, Canada. This small but intense fruit growing area is bordered by the lake to the north, the Niagara River to the east, the Niagara Escarpment to the south and the City of Hamilton to the west. The history of tender fruit production dates back to the early 1790s when cherries and peaches were being harvested at the mouth of the Niagara River in the then Upper Canada. In 1859, the Fruit Grower's Association of Upper Canada was formed and by 1872 there were 1600 members. The issues at that time which required resolutions were 1) asking the Minister of Agriculture to remove the embargo on manure coming from the United States and 2) requesting that the government increase the duty on imported tender fruits.

INDUSTRY STATISTICS

The tender fruit industry in Niagara produces over 90% of the production in Ontario and over 75% of the production in Canada. The 1997 farm value of tender fruits in Ontario is around CAN\$40 million (1 CAN\$ equals .63\$US) annually and is represented by the various crops in the following table.

Table 1. 1997 Farm value of tender fruit in Ontario.

Crop	(CAN\$ millions)
Apricot	0.6
Cherries, Sour	3.1
Cherries, Sweet	3.0
Nectarines	1.3
Peaches	25.7
Pears	6.0
Plums	3.1
Total	42.8

The total tender fruit acreage has also remained constant over the last few years (Table 2).

Table 2. 1997 Tender fruit acreage in Ontario.

Crop	Acres
Apricot	190
Cherries, Sour	1900
Cherries, Sweet	900
Nectarines	750
Peaches	7000
Pears	3000
Plums	1500
Total acreage	15,240

CLIMATE

Why is the Niagara area so successful for tender fruit production? The moderate climate in Niagara is perhaps the main reason for the consistency of production and subsequently the survival of the tender fruit industry in Ontario. The cold northwest winds in January pick up the warm air from the deep waters of Lake Ontario to help temper the extreme cold air which can damage the tender fruit buds. Vineland Station, located along the lake shore in the middle of the fruit belt, has an average of 168 frost-free days with a maximum of 206 days.

The average daily winter temperature in January is -4.5°C (24°F) while the temperature range is between -8.0°C (18°F) and -1.2°C (30°F). The probability of temperatures falling between -20.0°C (-4°F) and -25.0°C (-13°F) occurs 4 out of 10 years. The probability of temperatures falling below -25°C (-13.0°F) occurs 3 out of 100 years. The summer temperatures are considered moderate with an average daily temperature of 21.5°C (71°F). The Niagara region has an average precipitation of 837 mm (33 inches) of which over 60% falls during the growing season.

OTHER FACTORS

The Niagara region has a tremendous diversity of soils developed mainly from glacial lake deposits and glacial till. There are three main types of soils in the tender fruit lands: clay loam tills suited for pear, plum, apple and grape production; lacustrine, very fine sandy loam soils for peach, cherry, nectarine and apricot production; and a coarse sandy loam/gravel sand type soil best matched for cherry and peach production.

The backbone of the tender fruit industry is an offshore labor program. Fruit growers fly in and house workers from either the Caribbean Islands or Mexico. These reliable workers are brought in at planting and pruning time and stay until the end of harvest. Niagara is very close to market with most of the product going to large cities such as Toronto and Montreal. Tender fruit can be found in most markets in Atlantic Canada and as far west as Edmonton and is marketed under the Ontario Tender Fruit Producers' Marketing Board.

Agri-tourism has played an important role in the last decade for both the tender fruit and wine industry as the 3 million people of Toronto reach out to explore the richness of Niagara. Each year about 14 million people from Canada and the United States visit the Niagara region.

Initially, the fruit industry seemed doomed with North American Free Trade Agreement 10 years ago as a protected tariff for tender fruit was phased out. However, a weaker Canadian dollar during that time led to a competitive advantage for Niagara products compared to those mainly imported from California.

Important factors which have contributed to the success of the tender fruit industry are the keen and dedicated growers who have weathered some difficult years and are now reaping the rewards for their hard work.

TRENDS

Some trends in the industry today include:

- displacing some acreage of peaches to nectarines
- introduction of white-fleshed peaches
- new plantings of dwarf sweet cherries
- higher density peach and pear orchards
- moving from open center training to a central leader system
- using irrigation wherever possible
- new grape plantings encroaching on tender fruit lands
- growth in greenhouse floriculture and greenhouse vegetables

THE FUTURE

Diversity has been the success of the industry in the past and will continue to be in the future. There has always been a strong fresh market but there has also been a strong peach, pear and sour cherry processing industry for many years. The growers in Niagara strive to market the freshest produce and give the consumer what they want. Niagara has always been known for the falls, but the juicy cherries and the sweet, ripe peaches are what keep the consumers coming back.

ADDITIONAL READING

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