

A HISTORY OF THE NEW JERSEY PEACH

By

Ernest Christ, Rutgers Cooperative Extension Professor Emeritus

The history of the peach prior to its introduction to the Americas is well documented. The peach migrated from China to Persia (Iran) and from there to Greece. It moved to Italy, France, and Spain. The Spanish explorers brought it to Mexico in 1571 and later to South America. About 1600 it was introduced in North America and appeared in Jamestown, Virginia in 1607. It was cultivated in New Jersey, Delaware, and Maryland in the 1600's.

Peach growing began in New Jersey in the early 1600's when colonists began importing European varieties. It was learned by the early settlers that fruit thrived better in the coastal areas of the continent than in Europe. The first area of concentration is believed to be Cumberland County and the center of production changed many times during the early years. The first peaches were seedlings with white and yellow flesh, and the best of the seedlings became varieties.

New Jersey was well suited to the growing of peaches and an atlas published in Scotland in 1684 called New Jersey "The Garden of the World". Perhaps this is the origin of New Jersey's nickname "The Garden State".

By 1680, peaches were grown in abundance with extensive orchards from Trenton to New Brunswick. The area of production spread north to Morris County and around Hackettstown. The peach was the first fruit to receive attention commercially and it is reported in 1683 that peaches were available in New York by the wagonloads from New Jersey Orchards.

By the mid 1800's the fruit industry was receiving considerable attention and the entire state was known for its abundance and quality of peaches. Production reached sufficient quantities to ship over 500,000 bushels to New York markets by 1865. At this time, many peaches were being selected and named by New Jersey Growers. Some of importance was **EARLY and LATE CRAWFORD, REEVES, SMOCK, KEYPORT WHITE, STUMP, MOUNTAIN ROSE, AND IRON MOUNTAIN**. Toward the end of the 1800's Hunterdon County became the center of peach production, shipping as many as 750,000 bushels in a single season. At this time there were 90 varieties grown but only 20 were with a range from 6-10 years. The short life of peach trees was as serious a concern over 100 years ago as it is today.

The peach industry in New Jersey reached its peak during the latter part of the 19th century as measured by trees planted. In 1890, there were more than 4 million trees in the state, and half of these were in Hunterdon County. In 1886 San Jose Scale, that was imported into California from the orient, gained its first foothold in the East at a nursery near Riverton, New Jersey. It arrived on plum trees from a nursery in California. Before a control measure had been discovered, San Jose Scale had spread throughout the

state killing thousands of acres of peach trees. By 1920, there were fewer trees in the entire state than in Hunterdon County in 1890 as presented in Table 1.

NUMBER OF PEACH TREES

1890	4,414,000
1900	2,747,000
1910	1,216,000
1920	1,939,000

Production per tree or per acre was not very high in the early years because culture was minimal. By 1920, production reached 2,134,000 bushels, which was an average of only 1.1 bushels per tree.

THE PEACH BREEDING PROGRAM

The peach breeding program began at the New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station in 1907 under the direction of Dr. C.H. Connors. In 1914, the first commercial variety released was named **LIBERTY**. Peach breeding began on an extensive scale at Vineland, New Jersey in 1914. Professor M.A. Blake assumed leadership of the breeding program around 1921 and in 1925, nine new varieties were released. An outstanding yellow fleshed seedling was named **GOLDEN JUBILEE** in 1926. Professor A.J. Farley was the Extension Pomologist in those early years and a variety was named **TRIOGEM** for the trio of Connors, Blake, and Farley in the 1940's.

Professor M.A. Blake was an amazing man and should be considered the father of the peach industry of New Jersey. He died in 1948 and in 1953, the **BLAKE** peach was named in his honor.

Several peach varieties developed at the New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station that were of importance for many years in New Jersey and in other peach growing areas of the nation include **GOLDEN JUBILEE, SUMMERCREST, GOLDENEAST, AMBERGEM, JERSEYLAND, SUNHIGH, TRIOGEM AND BLAKE.**

Dr. Catherine Bailey and Frederick Hough assumed leadership of the Breeding program and introduced several varieties of commercial importance including **JERSEYDAWN, SUMMERGLO, JERSEYQUEEN, JERSEYGLO, AUTUMNGLO** and **ENCORE.**

Production during the past 50 years has averaged about 2 million bushels. The largest crop was in 1971 at over 3 million bushels and the smallest in 1972 at 500,000 bushels. New Jersey is situated so that peach crops are more consistent than most other areas in the country. The 1994 growing season was testimony to this. With the exception of those years mentioned, production is usually between 1.5 million and 2.5 million bushels.

The New Jersey Peach industry has an interesting past and Dr. Norman F. Childers must be included in this brief history since he was the Department of Horticulture's Chairman following Blake until he retired in the late 1970's.

I have been indeed been fortunate to have known and worked with Professor M.A. Blake, Drs. Childers, Hough, Bailey and the Peach Industry of New Jersey for more than 50 years.