

Sweet cherry grower has good results with high tunnels

By Hugh McElhone

The unusually cool, wet summers have yielded dismal production numbers for Ontario's fruit farmers. With no foreseeable change in weather patterns predicted, Pais Farms Inc. tried something different last year – they put a high tunnel over a section of their sweet cherry trees and were surprised with the results.

The Pais family of Simcoe area, Tony, Adelaide, son Roger and daughter Elizabeth, manage more than 100 acres of fruit trees. Of this, they have 15 acres of apples with the remainder devoted to peach, pear, and both sweet and sour cherry trees. There are also five acres of grapes.

“Adelaide takes care of the grapes and she prunes them all by herself,” says Tony. Watching Adelaide in action with the pruners, it soon became evident that she takes great pride in what she does and is very knowledgeable. To her credit, many of Adelaide's grapes have made their way into bottles at a local winery.

“We've been growing sweet cherries for about 22 years,” explains Tony. While the domestic demand for sweet cherries has always been strong, it can often be difficult to produce a good crop, particularly in a wet year. “We were about ready to give up on cherries,” he added, until they took a trip to England.

A considerable amount of British farm produce is now grown under high tunnels, and not just fruits but vegetables as well. “There, 200 acres of cherries (under high tunnels) is the norm,” says Tony. “They couldn't grow it as well without the tunnels because there's so much rain and it's cool.”

Inspired by what they saw, Tony and Adelaide decided to give the crop one more try and ordered 1.5 acres of high tunnel structure to place over a section of sweet cherries.

The high tunnel structure was purchased from Tunnel Tech of La Salette, Ontario. With some expert

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The Pais family – son Roger, daughter Elizabeth, mother Adelaide, and father Tony – manage more than 100 acres of fruit trees in Simcoe. Photo by Margaret Land



During the spring of 2009, the family decided to cover 1.5 acres of sweet cherries with a high tunnel structure. Contributed photo

guidance, the Pais family and work crew essentially built the entire structure themselves, and learned the intricacies of handling the plastic for the roof and side walls.

"It's not a three-man job," says Roger. "It takes a lot of people and we all have to work together, especially if it's windy."

Bracing the high tunnel proved a bit of a challenge for the family and crew due to the frequent high winds at the location. "It's a windy spot," said Tony, who noted that gusts often topped 120 km per hour last summer.

The Tunnel Tech experts were concerned the standard bracing method, which works well on nearly every other site, might not be sufficient for the high winds. "They designed a different bracing system for us and it worked pretty good. We had no problems," says Tony.

Being in a windy location does have its benefits. Tony explained that sunshine and a fairly regular breeze help keep fruit trees dry and reduce disease pressure. The breeze also maintains a steady exchange of fresh air in the tunnel, which helps keep it cool in the summer.

For the 2009 season, Tony sharpened his pencil and made notes on how the trees inside the tunnel compared with the sweet cherries growing outside.

Outside, he sprayed five times. Inside, he sprayed three times, noting "there wasn't much disease pressure in there but there are always bugs." Using the same drip irrigation already in use on the farm, the trees in the tunnel were watered as needed, while the trees outside did not require any irrigation.

When asked what his yield was on the trees outside the tunnel, Tony said it was zero. He explained the trees outside had already been set back by frost injury at blossom time, and that was further compounded by a season of cool temperatures and persistent rain. "It was too wet. Most of the fruit split," he said.

Inside the tunnel was a different story, a much better story. "We had a good crop year in there (and) picked nearly every cherry," Tony said. He noted that the quality and colour were excellent, plus they had good sugar content.

The yield inside the tunnel amounted to just over 2.5 tons, which was good considering the six-year old trees were only half-way to maturity. Tony said their aim is six tons per acre when fully grown. "This is good for young trees.



Outside of the tunnel structure, the family lost their entire sweet cherry crop to frost or fruit splitting. Inside the tunnel, the trees produced 2.5 tonnes of fruit. Contributed photo



The Pais family plans on expanding the tunnel structures every year and will be covering peaches and plums in future seasons. Contributed photo



Fruit quality and colour were excellent from the sweet cherries produced under the high tunnel, and they had good sugar content. All were sold from the operation's roadside market. Contributed photo



The Pais family grows about five acres of grapes, many of which make their way into bottles at a local winery. Photo by Hugh McElhone



Preparing for 2010, the Pais family has built a red-sided, 40 by 80 foot barn. They put up the structure themselves and have plans to add a cooler unit. Photo by Hugh McElhone

They are half way there,” he noted.

Frost did hit the trees while the tunnel was being constructed. “We couldn’t work fast enough,” says Roger. The family had nearly completed the structure and was waiting on plastic when the frost hit in late spring. “We lost about 15 per cent of the blossoms before we got the plastic up. There could have been more production from those trees but overall, they did pretty well,” says Roger.

Based on these production figures, Tony estimates it will take 10 years to pay for the high tunnel, which he thinks is quite reasonable. Plans are underway to keep adding more. “We will expand the tunnels every year. Peaches and plums will be next,” he said.

All of the Pais family’s produce is sold locally at a bustling roadside stand just south of Renton, Ontario, near the intersection of Highway 3 and Cockshutt Road. Last summer, that produce included some 5,000 pounds of fresh-picked sweet cherries. “We sold every

cherry we had locally, and I wish we’d had more,” says Tony.

Their roadside stand started off as a small wooden kiosk with an honour box. Last year, the stand grew to a large white tent crewed by family and staff. Given the amount of wind at the location, the tent provided a big billowing advertisement to potential customers driving along Hwy. 3.

“It wasn’t just bustling, we were swamped by customers every day,” says Elizabeth. “When it was both raining and windy, we had to run to our cars. The tent wasn’t a lot of help,” she noted.

Preparing for 2010, the Pais family has built a red-sided 40 by 80 foot barn, just south of where the tent once stood. Once again, they put up the structure themselves. This spring, lean-tos will be added to the barn and a cooler unit put in place.

“It’s already too small,” laughs Roger. “Another 40 feet would be nice but we’ll figure out future expansions at the end of the season. No barn is ever big enough.” ■