

Vegetables

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Sunnyside Packing

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Sunnyside Packing Continues As Bright Path

Fresno County Operation Grows, Packs, Sells and Ships

By Tim Moran, Contributing Writer

The story of the Hirasuna family's vegetable growing, packing and shipping operation is one of evolution over more than 60 years, from a strawberry cooperative to vineyards and stone fruits to squash, peppers and onions.

Sunnyside Packing was founded by Fred Hirasuna, along with Minoru Omata and Morris Cocola, in 1948, as part of a strawberry cooperative. The arrangement gave minority owned family farms in the Fresno area a way to pack and market their crop, according to Todd Hirasuna.

Todd is general manager of Sunnyside Packing and the third generation of his family involved in the business. His father, Stuart, ran the company until 2008, and is still involved, but is semi-retired.

Todd Hirasuna is managing for a good future at Sunnyside Packing.



Todd, 28, is a Cal Poly San Luis Obispo grad in agricultural business. His passion is the production end of the company. He credits his production staff with keeping the day-to-day details in order so he can work on big picture issues, but he still spends mornings in the field.

The strawberry industry gradually moved to coastal areas of California, and the cooperative dissolved in early 1980s, but Sunnyside Packing continues packing and shipping vegetables and fruits for about 120 farms in the region.

The Hirasuna family also grows its own vegetables on 700 acres, which comprises two-thirds of the Sunnyside total pack of about 1.1 million cartons.

The vegetable farming dates back to 1994, Hirasuna said. "We are relative newbies in growing," he said. The family also grew table grapes and stone fruits until about ten years ago.

Now the family specializes in several varieties of squash, including zucchini, yellow squash, Mexican grey

squash, butternut, spaghetti, Danish, kabocha and banana squash. They also grow eggplant, green beans, chili peppers, bell peppers and red onions.

The growing operation runs from early May through Thanksgiving, when the first frost hits, Hirasuna said. The squash is grown in spring and early summer, and again in late summer and early fall. That fits into a niche when squash from other regions aren't producing, according to Hirasuna.

"You pick stuff that fits your environment," he said. It's too hot in eastern Fresno County to grow squash in the summer, but peppers and eggplant thrive in it.

"Beans are something we always dabbled in. We decided six years ago to put the time and effort into it. If you have consistent quality and supply, it's a good asset to have in your corner," Hirasuna said.

Sunnyside is looking at mechanically harvesting green beans, a practice used on the East Coast but rare on the

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Bell peppers ripening in the field. The crop will soon be harvested and sold into the fresh market, by Sunnyside Packing.

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West Coast. Hirasuna has traveled to Florida to study the process, and is experimenting with two small harvesters here.

"At some point, mechanical harvest will come to the West Coast. It's not accepted here yet, we are in better shape on labor, being close to the border," he said.

The drawback to mechanical harvesters is that it is rougher on the beans, but Hirasuna thinks that can be overcome by using bean varieties that are sturdier, and different methods of packing.

"We want to put all our ducks in a row so we are not at square one when mechanical harvesting comes," he said.

Capital investment will be a challenge, Hirasuna said. He estimates that switching to mechanical harvesting will be a \$1 million investment, which means the equipment will need to be operated over a wider region, possibly used in the Coachella Valley as well as in the San Joaquin Valley.

"You have to increase production quite a bit to make everything pencil out. There's a laundry list of items you have to have right before you do that type of thing. We would probably partner with someone down there (in the Coachella Valley)."

Like all farming operations, the Hirasuna family deals with a variety of weed and pest problems, complicated by the fact that many of their neighbors are orchards and vineyards.

Many of the orchards spray herbicides on the berms surrounding the field, but leave the middle green, mowing and disking it, Hirasuna said. "Those weeds go to seed, and it builds up a seed bank. In vegetables, we don't have the strength to combat those issues."

Nutsedges are a big challenge, Hirasuna said. They reproduce well, and killing the nut that attaches to the root is a difficult process. Pre-emergents can suppress nutsedge in some crops to the point that the crop plant can out-compete the weed, Hirasuna said, but purple nutsedge is more difficult to control than yellow nutsedge. A herbicide like Dual Magnum is effective

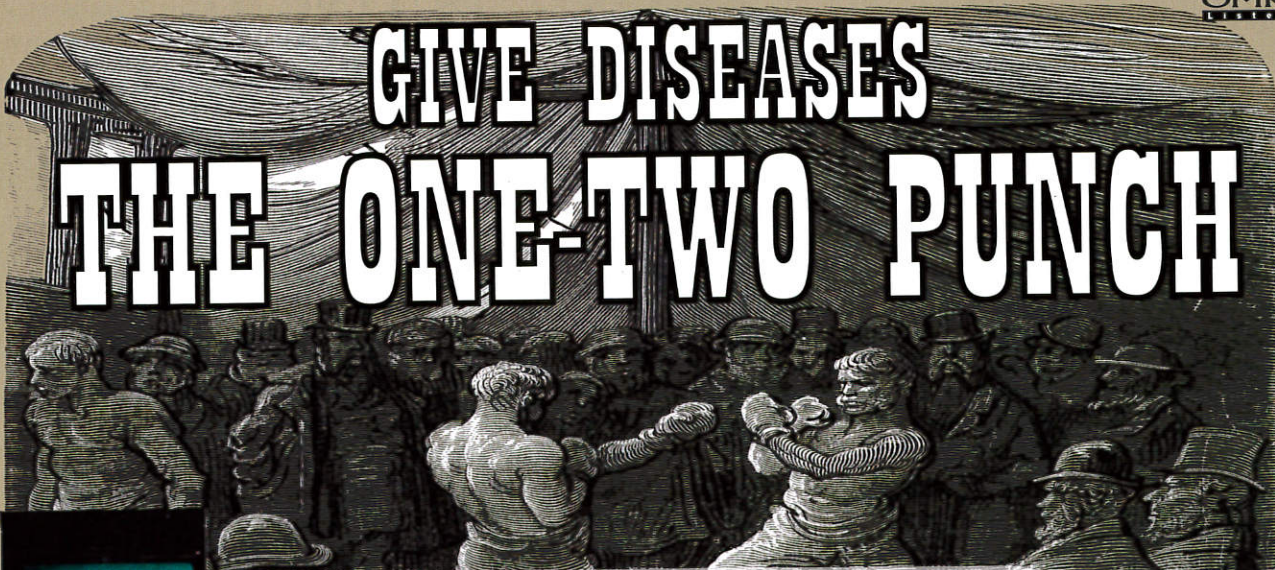


Hirasuna looks closely over the jalapeno peppers in a Fresno County field.


for yellow nutsedge on certain crops, but herbicides aren't effective against purple nutsedge, he said.

This year the farm invested in a six-bottom moldboard plow to invert the top 16 inches of topsoil. That buries the yellow nutsedge deep enough to deprive it of the sunlight it needs, and brings purple nutsedge to the surface, where it eventually dries out, Hirasuna said.


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Broad leaf weeds are also a problem, especially in wet years. "In winter time, we do bed prep as early as we can, and spray over wintering herbicides to keep the beds clean," Hirasuna said. "It's an uphill battle."

Aphids are the worst insect problem, especially in squash, Hirasuna said. They transmit mosaic viruses to the plant. "We use Admire, Platinum and some generics. We run it through the drip so that the plant sucks it up, and anything that bites the plant dies," he said. The problem, he added, is that the virus has already been transmitted to the plant when the insect bites it.

Hirasuna is experimenting with a chemical that he describes as "sort of an anti-viagra for insects." It makes the stylus that the insect uses to puncture the plant go limp, and the insect starves to death, he said. "We've had limited success with that," he added.

Eggplant and peppers are attacked by lygus, a sucking insect that feeds on the bloom, Hirasuna said. The bloom then dries up and falls off. The farm also battles Jerusalem crickets, which gnaw into drip tapes to get at the water, and darkling brown beetles, which eat around the base of plants.

"They will take down anything," Hirasuna said. "We see them in peppers. They can move pretty fast, in three to five days they can take out 15 to 20 percent of your field."

Cucumber beetles, rodents and white flies are a minor headache, Hirasuna said. "We use Admire-type chemistries to protect against them," Hirasuna



A bell pepper bloom prepares for fruit set.

works with PCA Dean Shiroyama, of CPS in Five Points.

Water isn't an issue right now, Hirasuna said—well levels and water quality are good on the east side of the county. He is keeping an eye on the battles on the west side, however.

"At some point we will be faced with a similar situation. Additional storage is definitely a must," he said. "Years like this highlight the need for it."

The company packs, sells and ships its own products, and has salesmen working with retail and wholesale customers. Products are exported to Canada and a little to Mexico, Hirasuna said, but most of it is sold in the United States. The products don't have a long enough shelf life to be shipped overseas in containers, he added.

A key to staying competitive is being flexible enough to change to meet

customer needs, Hirasuna said. One of those changes is going more toward reusable plastic containers, and consumer packaging rather than bulk packaging.

That's an opportunity to build a brand recognition, Hirasuna said. "Obviously we want the experience to be as good as possible for the consumer," he said. "Hopefully the consumer will recognize our label and name with a certain quality and consistency."

For the future, Hirasuna said the company would like to expand beyond the local growing region. That would allow the company to supply vegetables on a year-round basis, he said. The firm is also looking at diversifying the products to get into global markets.

But that's in the future. "We are relatively new in farming. You have to crawl before you can walk, and walk before you can run type of deal," he said.

In the meantime, Hirasuna is focused on growing the best crop he can in the most efficient way. "My goal is to put the farm in position to make money. You will have years where you have the best crop ever, and because of the market, you have to disk it under."

"Our crop variety selection has been trial and error. We've been able to fill gaps and create niches for ourselves. We've been able to use our environment to put ourselves on the map. We can supply an item that maybe can't be produced in other areas."

That's a formula that has worked for the past 60 years as Sunnyside Packing has evolved to meet the changing markets.

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Sized-up jalapeño peppers are nearing harvest.