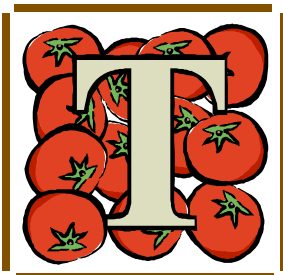


FRESH MARKET TOMATO PRODUCTION IN MERCED COUNTY



Fresh market tomatoes (*Lycopersicon esculentum*) are the number one vegetable commodity, by farm-gate value, in Merced County, with an annual market value of around \$50,000,000. Yearly production ranges from about 8 to 12 million 25-lb boxes, grown on about 10,000 acres. Merced County is the second largest producer of fresh market tomatoes in the state, behind San Joaquin County. The industry is centered in the Merced and Le Grand area, though fresh market tomatoes are grown in many areas of the county.

The Merced tomato industry began in the early 1900's when immigrants from northern Italy arrived and began growing tomatoes and other vegetables. By 1920 there was a small but healthy tomato growing and shipping industry. Many of the growers today are third and fourth generation descendants of the founding growers and shippers.

The fresh market tomato production year begins in early to mid March, when transplants are set in the fields. Determinate, bush-type, hybrid varieties account for 100% of acreage. Popular varieties include Shady Lady, Quali-T 21 & 23, Sunbrite, Sonnet, Classy Lady, Fair Lady, and Merced. Field plantings are staggered from March until July for harvests from June through October. Tomatoes are a warm season crop that do best when the temperature is above 80° F, yet not so hot that bloom and fruit-set are adversely affected (>100°F). One of the reasons the industry has been so successful in the Merced area for so long is because of the climate. Hot summer days coupled with relatively cool nights promote high yields and good quality fruit.

Fresh market tomatoes differ from processing tomatoes mainly in variety selection and harvest. The crop is hand harvested as mature greens, dumped into large trailers in the field, and taken to one of several packing sheds to be cleaned, sorted, and packed. The fields are rarely picked more than once during the harvest season. Because harvest is so labor intensive, production costs are much higher for fresh market tomatoes as compared to processing tomatoes. Typical production costs are \$4,000 to \$6,000 per acre, depending on yield. Harvest and packing costs account for about two-thirds of this total. Most of the tomato producers in the county have vertically integrated operations (grower-shipper-packer).

At the packing shed, the crop is rapidly cooled after picking for best postharvest quality. Mature green fruit can be ripened right away, ripened slowly, or stored before going through the ripening process. The process is controlled through the use of temperature and ethylene gas. After packing, the crop is normally treated with 100 to 150 ppm ethylene for 1 – 2 days at 68 – 70° F before shipping to assure uniform ripening. The packed tomatoes are then put into trucks and continue ripening while being shipped to the markets. About 60% of California fresh market tomato production is shipped to areas in the western U.S., and about 15% is exported.