

A Cherry Grower's Perspective

From a visit with *Bill & Cheryl Collins, Owners*
Collins Orchard, Yellow Bay, Montana
Lori S. Curtis



Bill Collins in the orchard

Over 100 small cherry orchards surround Flathead Lake where producers collectively put out 3-5 million pounds annually of cherries—on average—and as many as 7 million pounds. Some families have been growing cherries for over 80 years.

At approximately 3000 feet above sea level, with sunny, long, warm days and cool evenings, the Flathead Lake region is considered an ideal climate for cherry production. The 40-50 degree evenings extend the growing season and allow the fruits to mature over a longer period of time. The rocky, well drained soil and glacier fed water supply enhance tree growth.

But growing cherries in the Flathead isn't easy. A spring frost, strong winds, rain, or hail—especially hail—can put a sudden end to a beautiful crop of cherries that took a year to bring to maturity. And there is the important task of balancing the fertilization and pest management needs of an orchard with protecting the lake from too much nitrogen and too many pesticides. There are the costs of picking, sorting, packing,

hauling, and marketing that somehow need to be balanced with income from each year's crop. It's a tricky business.

Growers Bill and Cheryl Collins show me around their beautiful, small orchard the day before picking. My intrusion seems welcomed—perhaps I am keeping their minds off the darkening sky and the tension of the impending harvest. Perhaps, they just love sharing their passion with



Cheryl Collins in the gardens

people who take an interest. Bill demonstrates his FertiGator while explaining how the contraption worked. "Most farming is based on dogma. We tend to do what our fathers did and what is typically recommended. But sometimes some of us stop and look for new ways, study current research, and try experiments." Bill found the information and plans for the FertiGator on a website. The device is an automatic fertilizer injection system that allows for the precision of "spoon feeding" nitrogen with each watering. Concerned with his or-

chard's contribution of nitrogen to Flathead Lake and with rising production costs, he searched for and found a way to reduce his fertilizer use and costs by two thirds. It has been a highly successful experiment and a great investment for the orchard and the lake.



Bill with the FertiGator

Dozens of tree swallows dart overhead as ravens, crows robins, starlings, sparrows, and finches fly around the orchard. Many of these birds present a challenge as they eat the fruit of the Collins' labor. But, Bill and Cheryl have placed 16 nesting boxes around their property, of which 4 are filled with bluebirds and the rest with swallows this year. The swallows drive off the ravens and crows...it is aerial combat over the nesting boxes. Bill describes some of the concepts of Integrated Pest Management (IPM) and how the chemicals they use today are less intense, and more specific. "I can spray for fruit flies, but leave the beneficial lady beetles unharmed," explains Bill.



Collins' cherry orchard overlooking Flathead Lake

Bill and Cheryl have worked their land for many years. The orchard sits on about 100 feet of glacial gravel. The FertiGator and sod cover are building new soil, replacing what was lost when the original forest was logged in the 1950s. A freeze in 1989 killed off the Lambert's and gave the growers an opportunity to switch to the new Lapins. Today, the orchard is vibrant and loaded with plump, lush fruit.

Cheryl takes me through rows of Sweetheart and Lapin cherries and a small number of Gala apples and Damson plums.



The final product!

Bill waves from the house for us to join him at the telescope which is trained on a bald eagle's nest. We take turns watching as two juveniles tear away a meal brought by their parent. The orchard is a showcase of natural cycles. It is alive with color, life, and excitement. It is buzzing with the anticipation of the harvest.