

Preparing the Packinghouse for Peach Season



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The Southeastern peach industry is known for the high quality of its fresh peaches. As a new peach season approaches, it is time to ready the packinghouse for output of the best peach product. Several areas in the packing facility should be considered.

Hydrocooler

Clean your hydrocoolers. Consider running food-safe detergent at 0.5 percent with the addition of an appropriate defoamer (according to label) through the hydrocooler in preparation for the harvest season. Cleaning the cooler in this way will remove fruit inking contaminants that build up throughout the season. If you decide to do this, be sure to do it at least two times. The first cleaning will dislodge these materials, but the second will more thoroughly remove them from the hydrocooler. Pressure washing will improve your results.

Packing Line

All surfaces should be rust free. To accomplish this, sand and paint surfaces with an enamel paint. Make observations throughout the season and provide maintenance as necessary. The iron can become soluble in water used in the packing process and can cause inking at both high and low pH.

Clean brushes before the season and at least weekly thereafter. As with the hydrocooler, contaminants accumulate on the packing line, particularly on the brushes at the waxer. Research shows that wax from the brushes can accumulate pesticide residues. It is important to remove this potential source of contamination not only at the beginning of the season, but also regularly throughout the season—if not daily, then weekly. Use a food-safe detergent and brush the brushes while they are spinning.

Prepare foam-type drying rollers prior to running fruit for packing. When foam rollers are new, they contain contaminants that will discolor fruit or cause

inking. It is advisable to run the rollers for a few hours prior to packing fruit for sale. You should wet the rollers several times over this period to leach out the contaminants. It is a good idea to run the line with a small volume of fruit before packing to make sure that sources of inking have been eliminated.

Reduce impact injury on the packing line. One of the best ways to improve fruit quality is to improve transitions that can cause damage on the packing line. Laboratory tests demonstrate that drops greater than 6 inches can cause injury to peach fruit as will velocities greater than 3 meters/second. This translates to a need to reduce the velocity and height of some drops, especially the drop of fruit onto and off of the packing line. Slowing the speed of fruit dropping onto the packing line at the dry dump and into the packing box at the volume filler are two sites where great risk of damage can be mitigated. Sites on the line where the direction of travel changes are other locations of high risk for fruit injury. At these locations, using foam padding to cushion impacts or adding curtains to slow velocity can significantly reduce damage risk. In addition, reducing the slope of fruit drops can reduce velocity and reduce damage risk. An audit of your packing line can establish points where padding or curtains can be added or slope of drop can be reduced. Ask your county Extension agent to arrange an audit.

Cold Room

Arrange an energy audit. As with the packing line, careful scrutiny of cold room facilities can improve energy management of the packinghouse, reducing costs of operation and improving storage conditions of fruit. Replace cold room entry curtains and door seals annually, and examine them periodically during the season to determine if repair or further replacement is needed. An audit of the cooling unit will determine whether it is operating optimally. Cold room audits can also be arranged through your county Extension agent.

Food Safety

Many packing facilities are now attaining food safety accreditation. Even if you have not developed a program of “Good Agricultural and Management Practices,” it is important to attend to several areas in the packinghouse to safeguard your product and your reputation. Some of the recommendations given impact not only fruit appeal but also fruit safety.

Maintain clean packing line surfaces. Many buyers are now asking for a determination of pesticide residues on fruit they buy. We have found that fruit pesticide loads entering the packing facility are below EPA tolerance maximums when recommended pesticides and their preharvest intervals are observed. After hydro-cooling and fuzz removal by brushing, the pesticide load on fruit is nearly undetectable with pesticide testing, but reloading of pesticides on fruit is possible if waxing brushes are not cleaned on a regular basis.

Require workers to use appropriate sanitation practices. In addition, some retailers are asking for assurance that the fruit they purchase are free of human pathogens. Development of a food safety program that includes worker vigilance to support food safe practices—such as hand cleaning and wearing latex gloves to avoid peel damage from fingernails—will help assure the produce is free of human pathogens. For this program, be sure to equip the packing facility with hand cleaning stations, provide hand cleaning instructions, and be prepared to enforce regular cleansing by employees and visitors. For example, require your

employees to make a trip to a visible cleaning station prior to clocking in at the beginning of a shift or at the end of a break.

Packinghouse pest management. Simple measures must be taken to ensure that the facility is free of rodents. Do a “spring cleaning” in the packing facility that removes all items other than the approved items necessary to perform the packing process. Store all other items in other areas of the farm operation. Maintain good stock rotation practices for fruit boxes and other packaging materials. Use a regular pest management service that manages vermin with approved materials for a food handling operation. Use due diligence to ensure that pets and birds are not in the packing facility.

Protect the pack-out from foreign objects. Make an effort to assure that foreign objects do not end up in the pack-out. Packing line employees should not have food or drink containers in the inspection or packing areas. Ask them to limit jewelry to wedding rings and properly secured watches. Traffic and storage areas above the packing line must have a lip that prevents foreign objects from falling onto the line. Make sure all lighting is covered with protective material that will prevent contamination of fruit or the package below with glass if it shatters. Clean all surfaces situated above the packing line, such as the top surfaces of light fixtures.



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