



## Olive processor promotes new production methods

**Issue Date: November 11, 2020 By Kathy Coatney**

Table-olive acreage in California has dropped to an all-time low of approximately 15,500 acres—down more than half in 20 years—but recent interest in mechanical harvesting and other changes may show new potential for the crop.

In fact, olive grower Dennis Burreson says he believes the U.S. table-olive business "has the best opportunity to succeed in decades."

"Our industry is benefiting from recent international trade victories which have finally leveled the playing field for table olives," said Burreson, who also serves as vice president of field operations and industry affairs for Tracy-based Musco Family Olive Co.

Burreson said Musco wants to transition U.S. olive production to a modern, efficient crop. Doing that, he said, means changing how table-olive orchards are currently configured and harvested.

"We will do this through the increased planting of modern acreage and long-term contracts, which will make table olives the crop of the future in California," Burreson said, adding the transition would also benefit American customers, who have shown a strong preference for high-quality, California-grown olives.

He said olive production can help California farmers face numerous challenges, such as increased employment costs and a decreasing supply of people to work in agriculture, loss of prime farmland, rising water costs and increased restrictions on water use.

Burreson said when table olives are planted in a high-density format, yields are basically doubled per acre, and employment costs decline significantly when mechanical harvesting is utilized. In addition, olive trees are drought-tolerant, perform well on marginal soil and can enjoy peak productivity for decades. He outlined two primary reasons table olives could become more attractive. For one, the U.S. government is imposing tariffs on ripe olives from Spain, after an investigation found they'd been dumped on the U.S. market, causing harm to domestic

producers. Second, increased plantings of modern, high-density acreage will allow table olives to be grown successfully for decades to come, Burreson said.

Throughout their history in California, table olives have been primarily handpicked. With ongoing employee shortages and high employment costs, many farmers find that no longer viable.

"Mechanical harvesting is not only the wave of the future, but it is already here," Burreson said. "I have been using mechanical harvesters to pick my olives for the past 10 years, and it has been extremely successful."

He uses a side-by-side trunk shaker, saying he's found it very effective.

"Some growers are purchasing their own equipment, but as more modern acreage is planted, we are starting to see more custom harvesters become available," Burreson said.

Mechanical pruning is being done as well, which also reduces employment needs. But it can create problems with olive knot, which causes galls or "knots" on the tree, most commonly at the leaf node. The knots will girdle and kill infected twigs and branches.

Olive knot is a fact of life with table olives, Burreson said, but can be managed.

Different olive varieties show different potential for mechanical harvest.

There are currently many acres of established Manzanillo olive orchards that are handpicked. Some can be converted to mechanical harvest, but others can't, Burreson said. "I converted a Manzanillo orchard to mechanical harvesting about 12 years ago," he said. "Today, that orchard is 30 years old and thriving."

There is significant Sevillano acreage in the state, and many of these orchards are 50-100 years old. Typically, the trees have huge trunks, which limits their ability to transition to mechanical harvesting, Burreson said.

"However, given their importance for pollination and as specialty olives, Sevillanos will always be an important variety—but not the focus of mechanical harvesting at this time," he continued. Burreson said a modern table-olive orchard will be formatted similarly to super-high-density plantings for olive oil, but will look more like what is seen with new plantings of almonds, walnuts, pistachios and some tree fruit.

The new acreage has increased tree counts to approximately 250 trees per acre, compared with 80 trees per acre typically planted in a traditional olive orchard, he said. In addition, he said, newly planted orchards will have improved irrigation efficiency and feature mechanically adapted spacing and tree structure.

Burreson said Musco is offering long-term contracts to both its current growers and to new growers who are ready to plant high-density acreage.

"We will provide free nursery stock to these select grower-partners who are ready to plant new, state-of-the-art, modern acreage," he said.

The new-tree program was launched in September.

"The response from growers has exceeded our expectations," Burreson said. "Despite being in the middle of harvest, growers are contacting us every day to learn more about our offer."

Given the quality of the olives, along with the efficiencies of modern acreage, he said he believes California can support "significant" table-olive acreage in the years ahead.

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*One of California's main table-olive processors has been encouraging farmers to transition olive production to new methods that include mechanical harvesting, as shown above. A representative of Musco Family Olive Co. says high-density, mechanically harvested table olives could be attractive to farmers looking for alternative crops to plant. Photo/Kathy Coatney*