Orange Harvest Begins

By SMILEY ANDERS

PORT SULPHUR — Louisiana orange and satsuma growers have been trying to come back after a series of disasters that have plagued the citrus industry here.

Louis Chauvin, who operates a 1,000-tree orange and satsuma grove with his brother Rene, told of what had happened:

“Up until 1962 we had a good market for Louisiana citrus products, and produced 3 to 4 million boxes a year in this parish,” he said. “But we lost the market when the freeze of 1962 wiped out our trees. It takes about five years or so to grow trees to the size where they’re profitable.

Then Hurricane Betsy hit us in 1965 and covered the whole orchard with huge grapefruits. We produce maybe 300,000 boxes now. This is the best year since Betsy, but I don’t know if it’ll ever be like it was. Very few people depend on it for their income.”

Chauvin and his brother operate a tractor dealership in addition to their orange business.

This year the problem for the citrus growers is not the weather — it’s been a warm fall and the fruit is ripening well (although Chauvin said a cold snap — but not a hard freeze — would help the oranges ripen).

The problem is citrus growers in other states, who Chauvin says are dumping their products on the Louisiana market.

Break-Even Forecast

We’ll break even on satsumas,” he said, explaining that during the satsuma harvest, just ending, the cost of growing, picking, processing, boxing and selling the fruit amounted to $3.25 a box, while Florida growers were selling their satsumas to the big chain stores in the state at about $2.75 a box.

And while navels will run about $4.75 a box, Florida will be selling its navels at about $3.50 a box.

“Break even is $3.25 a box, Florida is selling its navels at $3.50 a box. It’s difficult to get the chain stores to pay more for Louisiana products, even though our quality is higher than the fruit brought in from outside the state,” Chauvin said.

He demonstrates by plucking a plump satsuma from a nearby tree, then a massive naval orange on the next row. He peels them and offers a sample.

“Why get a good product,” Chauvin said, “but we need to market it better to compete with the big citrus states. We have to let the people know that our oranges are top quality.”

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Some of the Louisiana citrus is sold to grocery chains in the New Orleans area, and stands which line the highway sell some to visitors. Chauvin is trying a new marketing technique by offering Christmas gift boxes, 24 to 36 selected navel oranges shipped at premium prices ranging from $10 a box in Louisiana and Mississippi to $13 in northern and far western states.

But his product can't be shipped to Florida or California at all, and also is kept out of citrus-growing areas of Texas and Arizona by state laws.

Chauvin feels it is unfair that these states can sell their products in Louisiana without restriction, but can keep his product out.

"If we could just keep Florida products out of the New Orleans area for a few weeks in November and December," he said, "we'd have a chance to regain this market."

In the meantime, Chauvin said he and his brother will continue to produce the big oranges and satsumas.

"We enjoy growing things, and with the help of the LSU Experiment Station here we've tried several new varieties. We're also installing heating systems for the grove, and we have enough diesel fuel to last us three days of hard freeze."

He peels another juicy navel and regards the groves around him.

"These are some of the finest oranges in the world. We don't add artificial coloring, and we grow them in as rich a soil as you'll ever find. We're real proud of them, and if we can beat hurricanes and freezes, we'll keep producing them..."

LOUISIANA ORANGES RIPE — December is harvest time for the navel orange crop of Plaquemines Parish, and grower Louis Chauvin, above, of Port Sulphur says it will be the best harvest since Hurricane Betsy wiped out the crop in 1965. Here Chauvin looks over some of the big oranges on one of the 1,000 trees of the grove he operates with his brother.

ORANGES FOR SALE — John Vogt, right, peels a navel orange at the fruit and vegetable stand he operates near Port Sulphur. The stands, which line Highway 23 south of New Orleans, feature Plaquemines Parish oranges and satsumas in addition to Creole tomatoes and vegetables grown in the rich black soil of the parish.

—Photos by Charles Gerald