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## Why Quality Should be Job One for the Fruit Industry



By **David Eddy** | August 25, 2020



Fruit breeder extraordinaire Floyd Zaiger passed away recently. His innovation and work ethic will be missed and stand as goals for the industry to aim for now and in the future. (Photo: David Eddy)

The first time I saw the effect of Floyd Zaiger's succulent fruit on an average consumer, a pleasant middle-aged woman who lived in my neighborhood, was shocking. The great fruit breeder **died a few months back at the age of 94** — and thinking of Floyd always gets me thinking of quality.

First, the quality of the man. **Zaiger Genetics** gets quite a collection of industry folks on the Modesto, CA, company's weekly fruit-tasting tours, from the nation's biggest growers and chain store buyers, all the way down to my 8-year-old son. Floyd treated them all the same: honestly, patiently, with an unmistakable twinkle in his eye. The man just had a way about him. One minute he might be theorizing about the myriad complexities of **CRISPR** or some other new aspect to fruit breeding. The next, he might wonder about the flavor of the fruit at the top of a tree, and not wanting to bother with a ladder, casually climbs up to the top and picks a beauty. And this when he was 82.

But, of course, it's for the quality of Zaiger Genetics' 400-plus patented fruits that he will be remembered by most people. Especially my neighbor, as the noises she made upon biting into the juicy, crimson Pluot would attest. "Where," she finally exclaimed, "can I buy this?"

Of course I had to tell her she couldn't, or at least that particular type. It was still an experimental variety, and had a long way to go before becoming commercialized, and was a long shot at that. I told her that for the same reason the Pluot she treasured was fantastic, it wasn't the type of fruit that could yet be sold on a widespread basis because it was too fragile. Essentially, I had to tell her what everyone knows in the fruit business, especially the stone fruit business, but is loath to talk about with consumers: It's easier to ship rocks than water balloons.

The stone fruit industry has been wrestling with this concept for many years. The industry has had an extremely tough time of it in the 22 years I have been an observer. Many large packer-shippers have disappeared, especially in the rough years after the turn of the millennium.

I have tasted many of the industry's conditioning efforts through the years. (It would be a lot easier, no doubt, if more Americans could learn to put peaches in a paper bag for a few days after purchase, but does anyone think that will ever happen?) Personally, I thought some of the conditioning efforts seemed to be working quite well.

Then just the other day, I mentioned something to my boss about few things being as good as a beautifully sugar/acid-balanced peach. He sighed, and said that at the grocery stores he shopped, it was strictly hit or miss, and he was just as likely to get a good peach as one that was inedible.

That's not sustainable, when the customer is happy with their purchase just half the time. Would you be a repeat customer under such circumstances? Shipping quality fruit isn't easy, but maybe the industry should refocus once again. Every industry should have a product that is so potentially

wonderful that the customer is left with just these five magic words: "Where can I buy this?"

I can hear Floyd chuckling now.