



HARVESTING MATURITY OF STONE FRUIT

THE degree of maturity of stone fruit at the time of harvesting has an important influence on the transport potentialities of the fruit and its subsequent marketing value. The ability, therefore, to recognise the correct stage of maturity for particular purposes is a valuable attribute of any person connected with the actual work of harvesting. There has been evidence in recent years that much better decisions as to the stage of maturity at which fruit is harvested could be made, particularly to avoid the marketing of immature fruit, and T. Conway, Orchard Instructor, Department of Agriculture, Hastings, not only emphasises in this article the need for an improvement, but also indicates how best this can be achieved.

THE stone-fruit industry has shown considerable expansion over recent years and large numbers of young trees now planted will shortly come into production. With this increased production it is vital to the industry to ensure that the fruit not only arrives on the markets in the best possible condition, but that the quality of it will encourage increased consumption.

As stone fruit is a very perishable product, there is an inclination at times to harvest the fruit when it is somewhat immature to make sure that it arrives on the market in sound condition. The result is that size and quality are often sacrificed, and the fruit is unlikely to be attractive to the consumer. The remedy appears to be better handling and transport rather than early or immature picking.

In recent years many growers and merchants have installed small pre-cooling and holding stores for these highly perishable fruits, and the Horticulture Division and the Railways Department are co-operating in trials

with a view to improving transport conditions for pre-cooled stone and small fruits.

With growers of the earlier varieties of fruit there is a desire to be the first on the market while the prices are high; good maturity, size, and quality being given little consideration. Would those who make a practice of this buy such fruit in the retail shops or elsewhere, and would they go back for more? It should be remembered that the satisfied buyer is of utmost importance to growers.

Marketing of immature fruit becomes a short-sighted policy when the encouragement of increased consumption and repeat orders is so vital to the future of the industry.

Guiding Factors

If fruit is picked too soon, the quality suffers and the fruit is unattractive on the market and to the consumer. On the other hand fruit left on the trees too long tends also to lose its quality; it becomes soft, and

damages easily from pressure and handling in transit to the markets. An intermediate stage of maturity should therefore be the aim. In this respect no set dates can be indicated or adhered to for specific varieties, as the correct period varies each season, depending on prevailing conditions.

All fruit on a tree does not mature at the same time and therefore the work of picking becomes essentially a very selective process requiring good judgment. Frequent or successive pickings of any one variety are necessary, particularly during periods of warm or hot weather. Some varieties mature more unevenly than others and so require more frequent attention and greater judgment to obtain the best results.

In selecting the fruit for picking it is advisable that it should be fully developed but still firm. "Firm" in this case does not mean hard and green but that the fruit still retains a stage of immaturity, requiring complement of the ripening process after picking. The fine distinction of both maturity and firmness must be appreciated.

The proximity of an orchard to the markets is often a deciding factor in determining how mature the fruit should be at harvesting time. Where it is necessary to transport fruit long distances it needs to be firm, but should also show some colour and change in flesh texture typical of the variety. Where markets are closer more latitude will be possible in respect to maturity, with more colour

HEADING PHOTOGRAPH: Peaches being carefully selected on a maturity basis and well handled.