



From the Fields - Brooke Hazen

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Brooke Hazen
Photo/Lisa Rose

By Brooke Hazen, Sonoma County olive oil producer and apple grower

Apple harvest is done, and we have moved to olive harvest. I started custom crushing for customers in early October and started my own harvest in mid-November. I go through all my varieties until around Christmas. I have 21 varieties, four different blends. Olives are alternate-bearing, and this year I'm having an "on" cycle. I'm having a banner year. It's right up there with my previous high years. Every tree was in flower and was fruiting, so very high yields.

Something related to tech is we use pneumatic combs with long fingers that vibrate and oscillate (to harvest). They knock the olives from the tree onto the ground as you comb through the branches. You comb them onto the ground and onto nets. Rather than hydraulic-driven power from the tractor, we use batteries that plug into a backpack to power the combs and the rakes. The older batteries were made of nickel. The new ones are made of lithium. I have both. I started with nickel, and now I've started using more of these lithium batteries. You might get seven to eight hours on a single charge (on lithium), whereas nickel batteries last four or five hours. With lithium batteries, you do have to be a lot more careful shipping them. They can get damaged easier, and I don't think the lifespan is quite as long.

I started out hand harvesting olives and then moved to combs about 10 years ago when my crop became so large that it wasn't viable to harvest by hand anymore. This (method) is in between hand harvesting and over-the-row machinery like they do in the super-high density (plantings). I'm traditional high density, which is about 30-by-30 feet. I'm on hills, so I can't do over-the-row harvest. With combs, harvest is around six times quicker (than picking by hand). But it's for olive oil. You can't use (combs) for table olives because it can bruise the fruit.

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