

U.S. fruit company Stemilt says it is expecting a larger California cherry crop this season, as well as an increased focus on top seal and clamshell packaging.

However, Stemilt doesn't expect record volumes because of lighter crop loads on trees throughout the state.

The California season is about to get underway and will run for about four weeks, with volumes available from May 8 to June 8, the company said.

"We're anticipating our California cherries to come off the tree in a larger size profile with dessert eating qualities," said senior marketing manager Brianna Shales. "There will be opportunities to promote California cherries as the crop picks up in volume around May 8."

Cherries are an item that most consumers purchase on impulse, Shales noted. Covid-19 has transformed the grocery shopping experience with store trip frequency down, social distancing measures causing people to shorten the time they spend in stores, and online grocery sales booming.

"Cherries are one of the few seasonal items that remain in produce," said Shales. "Shoppers need to be reminded that they are back in season and available to purchase."

"This is especially important online with new shoppers gravitating towards curbside pickup or delivery methods to get their groceries."

Packaging may be another change for cherries that comes with a Covid-19 world. Random-weight bags are the top package type for cherries, but Stemilt expects to see an uptick in clamshells and top seal this season.

These consumer packs feature UPCs for scanability, are easy to display at retail, and make it easy for online shoppers to understand the pack size they are buying.

"We've seen consumers shift to bags over bulk in apples over the past month and are prepared if that trend continues with cherries. Stemilt has great capacity to pack these consumer pack types in both California and Washington," she said.

The largest volume weeks for cherries in 2019 came in July. Stemilt's Washington cherry crop is in bloom now and it's too early to predict exact timing and crop size.

"We're looking forward to a great - and long - cherry season at Stemilt," said Shales. "Our program is built around differentiation. We help differentiate through variety, package

types, quality, and brands.

"We are ready to work with retailers to drive cherry purchases in-store and online and have resources available to do just that."



Stemilt also recently released a [Fast Facts: The Cast episode](#) that shares Nielsen scan data insights on cherries.

Shales and the company's marketing director Roger Pepperl highlight category numbers from the 2019 season and offer retailers advice for navigating cherry season as the country faces unprecedented changes to grocery shopping habits due to Covid-19.

"Cherries are a key part of the produce department every summer, accounting for 3.1 percent of fresh produce department sales weekly on average in the U.S. during the May to September 7 timeframe," said Shales.

"In peak weeks, that grows to 5 percent and above, with the Northeast and Midwest regions

skewing above average. It's important to build a retail strategy that helps shoppers locate and purchase cherries no matter how or when they purchase groceries."