

Selling A Vision

A Northeast grower, with a little help, takes IPM production and marketing to a new level.

**By Brian Sparks
Editor**

THE Clark brothers consider themselves strong followers of integrated pest management (IPM). But then again, who wouldn't take this approach? With rising input costs and pressure from consumers, moving their pest control programs in the direction of IPM is something most growers are looking to do already.

The way to differentiate yourself

from other growers, according to Aaron Clark of Clark Brothers Orchard in Ashfield, MA, is twofold: you need to be able to effectively use IPM as a production/marketing strategy, and you need to essentially convey to the public that you are following an advanced IPM approach, even if you can't commit to being organic.

"We come as close as you can come to organic in New England and still have a crop," says Clark, one of three brothers who, with the help of a local

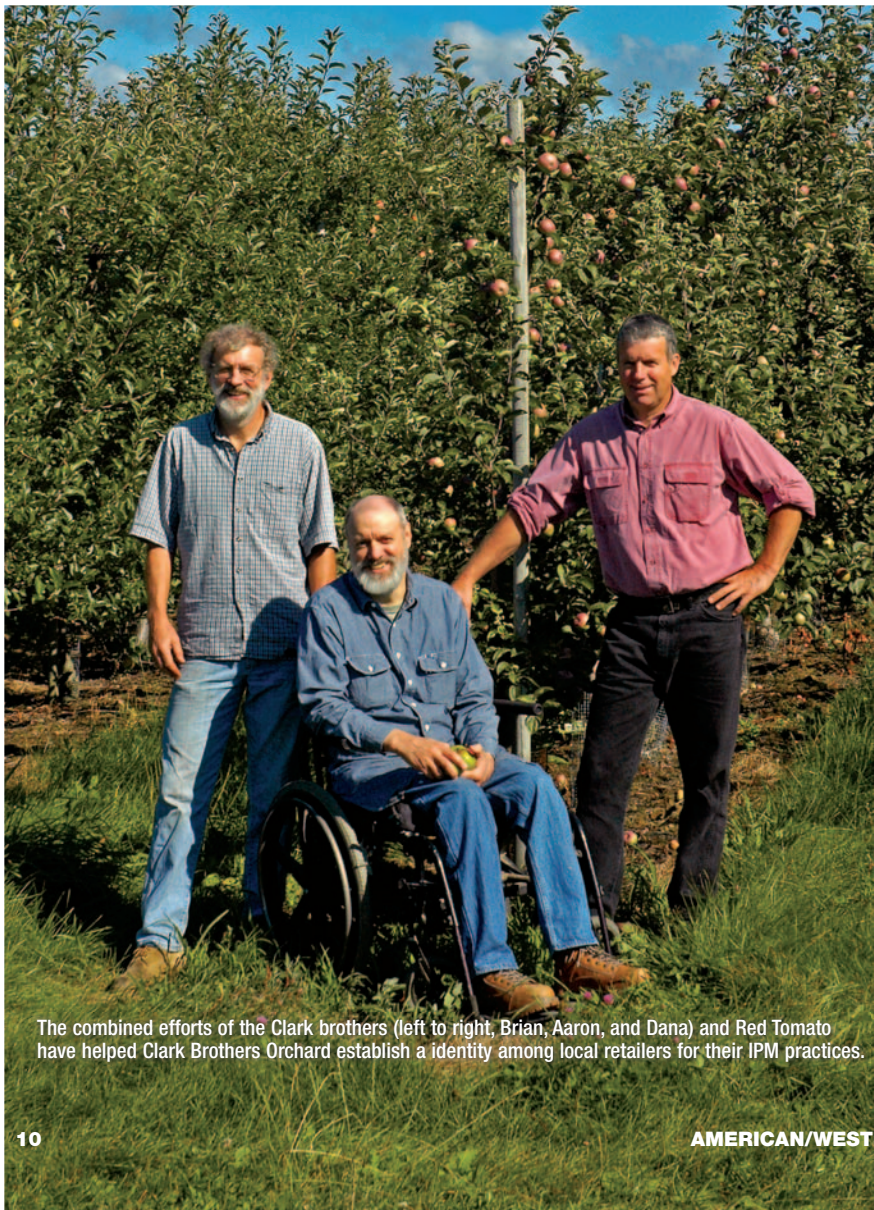
family farm marketing organization, have positioned themselves as key retail suppliers in the Northeast.

Setting The Foundation

Clark Brothers Orchard was founded back in 1886, but until the early 1980s, it served as both an apple orchard and a dairy farm. When Clark's uncle died in 1982, his family inherited the apple business, and his father sold the dairy herd to devote himself to apple growing. While Clark's father and his brother Dana ran the orchard, he and his brother Brian went in slightly different directions: Brian worked for IBM as a software engineer and Aaron ran a gunsmith business for many years. However, both Brian and Aaron kept their ties to the farm, helping out when necessary, and now each of them plays an active role in the business.

Aaron Clark's journey to heading up Clark Brothers' marketing program has been particularly interesting. While in college, he became a paraplegic as a result of an accident he suffered while painting high-tension towers during a summer job. But even in his time away from the orchard, he maintained an interest in apple growing. Following the death of his uncle, and while Dana was on a missionary trip to Michigan, Aaron Clark returned to the farm full-time. He even retrofitted a John Deere orchard tractor to provide easier access and more hand controls. "I really enjoy the work and forgot how much I liked it when I was younger," notes Clark. "I felt like I was doing what I was meant to be doing." He also worked with Brian to set up a wireless computer system on the farm.

When Clark took over the finances at the orchard, their biggest buyers were C&S Wholesale Grocers and Bread & Circus, which was to become Whole Foods Northeast. The relationship with each of these companies was strong, and working with C&S allowed them to continue market-



The combined efforts of the Clark brothers (left to right, Brian, Aaron, and Dana) and Red Tomato have helped Clark Brothers Orchard establish a identity among local retailers for their IPM practices.

ing more traditional varieties such as Cortland and McIntosh. However, Dana's foresight had led the Clarks to newer varieties including Macoun, Gala, and Honeycrisp, and as their relationship with Whole Foods expanded, they realized they needed an updated marketing strategy. Enter a company called Red Tomato.

Handle With Care

Clark first learned of Red Tomato when he saw its owner, Michael Rozyne, speak at a conference in early 2001. At the time, Red Tomato was making a name for itself as an avenue for growers to market their produce locally, with a focus on growers committed to ecologically sound growing practices (see "The Fruit Of Red Tomato"). Clark saw this as an opportunity to move more fruit, and made a point to get in contact with Rozyne. As it turns out, the feeling was mutual, and a formal relationship between the companies was established in 2002.

Prior to this, Clark Brothers' sales agreement with Whole Foods had expanded to the point where they had to add a second shift to their packinghouse to keep up with demand. Red Tomato stepped in by arranging brokering and marketing deals and setting up point-of-sale materials in the stores, so consumers could get to know more about the growers supplying the products they were buying.

Once the supply chain was cemented, the next step was to strengthen the eco-friendly marketing component. Clark was asked to participate as a grower adviser in Red Tomato's new Eco Apple project, which meant defining protocols for the program and establishing a set of specific goals. "I was happy to do so because I believe that we need some way to distinguish our advanced IPM approach to growing apples from what is generally considered conventional," says Clark.

The Eco Apple protocol must be followed in order to be certified with Red Tomato. The protocol prohibits the use of many otherwise legal materials and severely restricts others, according to Clark. There is also a great deal of emphasis on worker safety and best practices to produce the highest quality fruit in an ecologically friendly way. Growers must submit an updated self-evaluation, plus records of any material applications, at least 10 days prior to harvest. Every third year an independent inspector conducts an on-farm certification visit.

For the Clarks, the transition was not too difficult, as they were an early adopter of IPM practices and were already following many of the concepts in the protocol. "The biggest difference for us is paying close attention to season limits and per-acre limits," says Clark. Because the limits for most chemical uses fall well below the legal levels, this necessitates increased vigilance by the grower.

Both Whole Foods and C&S have shown great interest in the Eco Apple program. In the future, Clark hopes to develop a standardized packing system that will allow them to command a premium for the Eco Apple label.

In the long term, Clark sees many other benefits to this type of marketing

relationship. "We are a small family farm and, as such, an endangered species, says Clark, "We must be able to cater to a high-end market. I believe that the Eco Apple project can help us hold on to and expand our reputation as a high-quality producer. We must increase our profit margin if we are to survive for another generation."

Clark also notes that with their location limiting their direct retail possibilities, being certified as an Eco Apple producer is the best chance to increase the value of their crop. "Producing a crop in an eco-friendly and sustainable way is the only sensible option we have," says Clark. ●

E-mail questions or comments about this article to bdsparks@meistermedia.com.

The Fruit Of Red Tomato

THE primary mission of Red Tomato is to help family farmers survive in a market dominated by global agribusiness. Red Tomato serves growers by brokering and marketing fruits and vegetables between farms and supermarkets. Its principal concern is the survival of small growers. "We strive to pay a fair price to farmers which covers production costs and ensures that a grower will be around next year," according to founder and owner Michael Rozyne.

The Eco Apple program was developed as a way to market Northeast apples that were grown on family farms using ecological methods. After developing a production and pest management protocol with help from the IPM Institute and local growers, the next step was to determine how to market IPM to an increasingly sophisticated consumer market. Because organic apples are next to impossible to grow commercially in the Northeast, apples are an especially good vehicle for education on advanced IPM practices. To meet this goal, Red Tomato focused on building value and recognition for IPM practices through packaging, signage, and brochures for consumer education. They also built on strong retail buyer relationships by focusing on quality and maintaining close communication throughout the season.

Benefits on the grower side include: a network of producers to support each other; research support; and the ability to market their apples as certified. On the marketing side, growers have a brand to represent and distinguish them in the market, and a logistics and ordering system managed for them by Red Tomato.

Currently, there are six farms certified with the Eco Apple program, all in the Northeast: Clark Brothers Orchard (Ashfield, MA); Alyson's Apple Orchard (Walpole, NH); Lyman Orchards (Middlefield, CT); Scott Farm (Dummerston, VT); Stone Ridge Orchard (Stone Ridge, NY); and Sunrise Orchards (Cornwall, VT). However, Red Tomato is open to adding up to three growers per year, and will look for growers with the following qualities:

- They must primarily sell wholesale rather than direct;
- They must be committed to the highest quality;
- They must have a postharvest (packing and storage) infrastructure in place;
- They must have a good chemistry in working relationships;
- They must grow varieties that Red Tomato can sell or balance with other varieties supplied by their existing supply chain; and,
- They must be committed to using advanced IPM and to continually working toward more stringent ecological practices.

For more information on Red Tomato and the Eco Apple program, go to www.redtomato.org.

