

Cherry health products sold around the world

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For people who suffer from painful arthritis or gout, tart cherries could ease the discomfort.

Powerful antioxidants can relieve pain and inflammation without having to rely on aspirin or other medicinal painkillers, local cherry advocates say.

Today, the focus of the cherry industry has shifted largely to exploring the health benefits naturally found in tart cherries and promoting the fruit as a healthy option, not just a dessert menu item.

"Rather than being new or different, we're building upon the concept of health benefits of cherries," said Judy LaCross, director of cherry promotion for the National Cherry Festival and owner of LaCross Farms. "I don't know that we've connected all the dots yet, but there's progress being made."

Now, with a more health-conscious society, promoting how healthy cherries can be is as important as ever, LaCross said.

LaCross added that she hopes by emphasizing the pain-relieving antioxidants natu-

rally found in cherries, the fruit will become more marketable.

It's likely that will happen, said Jane DePriest, marketing director for the Cherry Marketing Institute in Lansing.

"All of the health benefits information is going to enhance the demand for tart cherry products," DePriest said. "We pretty much are marketing Montmorency tart cherries as the healing fruit."

This past winter, a grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture made it possible for a nutrition analysis and other testing to be done on four main tart cherry products — frozen cherries, dried cherries, canned cherries and cherry concentrate, DePriest said.

Out of the testing came a way to determine how many antioxidants are present in tart cherries and how powerful they are, she said.

Other findings show tart cherries high in vitamins A, B6 and beta carotene, she said. "Cherries are a very natural product and people are very into using things like that," she said. "People think that they can feel

better with a natural food product like cherries, as opposed to taking prescription medication."

Bob Underwood, a former fruit grower at Underwood Orchards and Farm Market, recently developed Cherry Flex, a gel capsule that contains a whole cherry in each capsule.

"We wanted to be able to deliver that fruit in a convenient and easy way," Underwood said. "Anything we can do to make us be healthier, stay healthier, eat more fruits on a daily basis, is just a mission I enjoy working on."

About a year-and-a-half ago, Underwood created the technology and process to make the capsules, and has been marketing the product worldwide ever since, he said.

So far, Cherry Flex has reached England, France, Japan and South Korea, he said. Locally, Meijer and Oleson's grocery stores carry the capsules, as do drug stores, Underwood said. The product is also available on the Internet and by telephone.

To make each capsule, Underwood takes a whole cherry and makes it into a paste



R-E file photo/Douglas Tesner

before encapsulating it, he said.

"I was thoroughly convinced that the red tart cherry had enough health benefits in the fruit that if a person took it once a day, every day, they would get enough," he said. "The product that we're using encompasses the whole cherry, and the bulk of the health benefits are really in the skin portion of the fruit."

Efforts to make people aware of the health benefits in tart cherries have been going on for several years, said LaCross, the cherry promotion director for the Cherry Festival.

"The biggest thing is constant education," she said. "You've got to get the word out there."

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