

New Cherry Cultivars May Come From Europe

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Although the sweet cherry industry in most European countries is considerably smaller than the U.S. industry major investments have been made by a number of countries to breed new cultivars adapted to local climatic conditions. For example, although Hungary produces only 25,000 to 30,000 tons of sweet cherries per year scientists have been breeding cherries near Budapest for the last 50 years to help support their industry. Other major sweet cherry breeding programs are located in Germany, France, Italy and the Czech Republic.

Some of the best of these new cultivars are slowly replacing the standard European cherries grown for years. European growers have found the new cultivars commonly offer larger size, more crack resistance, greater durability and extended seasons compared to the old standards. These same attributes are important to sweet cherry growers in the United States. It was for this reason that I determined to evaluate the most promising of these cultivars when I was in Europe last summer for the International Sweet Cherry Conference held in Scandinavia.

My evaluation covered five production regions, Hungary, Norway, Denmark and two sites in Germany. Of particular interest were those cultivars which were being planted or gaining interest by growers in western Europe. These included Margit, Kordia, Karina, Regina, Linda, Katalin, Giorgia, and Techlovan.

Although Linda, Katalin and Giorgia each have several positive attributes, for one reason or another I did not feel that they would meet the demands of the U.S. cherry industry. Linda seems to ripen at about the same time as Bing and was heavily rain cracked in one location in Germany. Katalin is a late cherry from Hungary with good firmness and cracking resistance, but has a somewhat astringent taste. Giorgia had good flavor but I believe the fruit is just too small for our markets. Due to these deficiencies Linda, Katalin and Giorgia are not reviewed further in this article. In addition, I was unable to adequately evaluate Tchelovan.

Margit: This Hungarian cherry, I believe, has good potential for the early market and compares quite favorably to Chelan, a new early selection out of Washington State University. Probably its main weakness is that it appears to be slightly later than Chelan, possibly giving up some of the early market advantage that Chelan enjoys. However, Margit is a slightly larger cherry, averaging 11 to 10 ½ row and I thought somewhat firmer than Chelan. Margit has a very good, mild sweet flavor, with a slight acidic tang. I did not observe this cherry under rainy conditions, so was not able to evaluate this important characteristic, however, the Hungarians maintain that it shows good crack resistance. What I did see of the cherry, however, both in Hungary and Norway, impressed me. I believe it to be the best of the early cherries from Europe that I have had

a chance to evaluate and would recommend that it be tested in the United States to determine its potential for the American cherry industry.

Kordia (Attika): Available in the United States as Attika, this Czech cherry ripens approximately seven to ten days after Bing in the same ripening window as Lapins. Three years ago I took a small group of growers to Wenatchee, Washington to evaluate this cherry. The majority of these growers commented that they preferred Kordia to Lapins, although I was not as enthusiastic. Since evaluating the cherry in five locations in Europe, however, I have changed my mind and believe that it may have good potential for the American cherry industry. Kordia blooms late, yet has a reputation of being sensitive to frosts. It has a very appealing, strong, sweet flavor. The fruit is firm and meaty and grows to a very consistent 10 row size. Harvest can begin as early as 10 days after Bing but there is a large harvest window. The fruit also has a long shelf life. The tree is precocious and bears heavily. Kordia shows good cracking resistance. In Germany, we saw this cherry after 24 hours of heavy rain, yet the crop was still very harvestable. Perhaps the biggest concern that I have about Kordia is the heart-like shape of the fruit. Beyond this, however, I was very impressed with this cherry at every location.

Karina: Prior to my most recent trip to Europe I had heard very little of Karina. This is a German cherry and limited commercial plantings are just now being developed near Hamburg, Germany. Karina also ripens in the same window as Lapins and like Lapins the tree is very upright and vigorous. Data from the Jork, Germany experiment station would indicate that Karina averages 9 ½ row, although fruit size was somewhat smaller than that this last year. Karina seems to possess the rare combination of excellent firmness and good crack resistance, attributes that we were able to observe first hand. The flavor of the cherry was excellent, exhibiting a very attractive mild-sweet taste. Overall, I was very impressed with Karina, and believe that it has the potential of being the best European cherry that ripens in this time frame. Trials by U.S. scientists and growers are needed to determine if this cherry can compete with Lapins as the cherry of choice for the late market.

Regina: An excellent new cherry also out of the Jork research station in Germany, Regina showed consistent high quality fruit at every location that I evaluated it. I was impressed with a number of very strong attributes. Although not entirely defined, the ripening window seems to be located between Lapins and Sweetheart. A niche that has not been filled by any other quality cherry and could potentially help growers maintain their labor force late into the season. Regina blooms late providing some resistance to late season frosts. The fruit is very large and firm growing to 9 ½ to 9 row in size. Cracking resistance was excellent, exhibiting only 20% cracked fruit after 24 hours of heavy rain near Nuremberg, Germany. In addition, the flavor was very good, although not as attractive as Karina. The tree is not a consistent cropper, however, occasionally producing light crops. Finding a good pollinizer may also be a problem, although Kordia is a common choice in Europe. Regina has just been introduced to the United States and a limited quantity of plants is just now becoming available.

To test these and other new cultivars a consortium of North American scientists has been formed under the title Genotype Research Consortium or GRC. Although tested by European scientists and accepted by many European growers, these cultivars have not undergone evaluation under climatic and market conditions prevalent in the United States. Scientists in this program will be able to evaluate these cherries under local conditions and determine which, if any, are likely to perform well under our growing conditions. In the near future these and other cultivars will be evaluated in Oregon, Washington, Michigan and Canada.

References

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Picture captions:

Margit, from the Hungarian breeding program could compete with Chelan as an early market cherry

Kordia, available in the United States as Attika, had excellent flavor and good crack resistance in a very firm cherry.

Karina is a great tasting cherry that ripens along with Lapins. Further testing is needed to determine its true potential for the U.S. cherry industry, but early indications are very favorable.

Regina's large size, excellent firmness, high crack tolerance and very late ripening window make it one of the most promising of the new cultivars from Europe.