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Understanding Peach Procurement by the Intermediaries in New Jersey

Abstract

New Jersey has historically ranked among the top five peach-producing states in the United States, but production has declined significantly over the past few decades. Although the acreage has recently stabilized, there remains strong unmet consumer demand for locally grown peaches. To better understand how this demand can be met, a survey was conducted among peach procurement intermediaries, including distributors, wholesalers, and retail produce managers across New Jersey and neighboring states. Cost, consistent quality, and reliable supply were the most frequently cited priorities. Respondents were willing to source more New Jersey peaches, particularly when the fruit offered good flavor, maintained firmness, and met preferred packaging formats. However, several barriers were identified, including a lack of consistent promotional materials, a limited variety of offerings, and insufficient communication regarding crop availability and timing. Retailers preferred tree-ripened but firm peaches, also noting a strong interest in white and specialty peaches such as donut varieties. Store managers confirmed they would display promotional banners or signs if provided and expressed interest in extending the local peach season into mid-

September. These findings suggest that large and small retailers benefit from improved coordination with local producers. New Jersey growers can build a more substantial market presence by adopting Rutgers-developed varieties like Gloria, enhancing product branding, expanding commodity offerings, and working directly with buyers on quality, logistics, and promotion. Aligning practices with retail needs will help strengthen the long-term sustainability of New Jersey's peach industry.

Introduction

New Jersey, often called the "Garden State," has a long-standing tradition of peach cultivation, benefiting from favorable agroclimatic conditions that support the growth of high-quality peaches and nectarines. For this study, nectarines are included under the term "peaches" due to their genetic similarities. Historically, New Jersey has been among the top five peach-producing states in the United States. However, the state's peach production has experienced a significant decline over the past few decades, with acreage decreasing from approximately 16,000 in the 1980s to around 3,800 in 2022 (USDA NASS, 1982; 2022).

Several factors have contributed to this decline. The influx of peaches from other regions, particularly California, driven by advances in cold storage transportation, has increased competition and impacted the market share of New Jersey-grown peaches (Crisosto and Valero, 2008). Additionally, challenges such as rising production costs, environmental stresses including frost and drought, and limited marketing efforts have further strained the local peach industry (Grow Well, 2025; Rutgers NJAES, 2022). Despite these challenges, a substantial opportunity remains to revitalize New Jersey's peach industry by tapping into the strong consumer demand for locally grown produce. New Jersey's dense population and proximity to major metropolitan areas like New York City and Philadelphia provide a significant market for fresh, locally sourced peaches. Consumers are increasingly seeking out local products, valuing freshness, flavor, and the support of local agriculture (Atchison, 2023).

Understanding the dynamics of peach procurement is essential to addressing the disconnect between local producers and the market. Intermediaries play a pivotal role in the supply chain, influencing the availability and promotion of New Jersey peaches to end consumers. Intermediaries refer to the individuals or organizations involved in procuring, distributing, and retailing between the producers and the end consumers. However, there is limited understanding of the factors that influence these intermediaries' decisions to source peaches from New Jersey versus other regions.

Previous studies have highlighted the importance of product attributes such as flavor, firmness, and shelf life in influencing procurement decisions (Yue et al., 2014). Moreover, effective marketing strategies, including branding and in-store promotions, have been shown to impact consumer purchasing behavior and can be leveraged to enhance the visibility of local produce (Robbins, 2019).

To bridge this knowledge gap, this study aims to investigate the procurement practices of peach intermediaries in New Jersey. By conducting a comprehensive survey of distributors, wholesalers, and retail produce managers, the research seeks to identify the key factors influencing their sourcing decisions, assess their perceptions of New Jersey-grown peaches, and explore opportunities to enhance the market presence of local peaches through targeted marketing and improved supply chain coordination.

The findings of this study will provide valuable insights for stakeholders, including growers, marketers, and policymakers, to develop strategies that support the sustainability and growth of New Jersey's peach industry.

Methods and Objectives

In 2024, a structured survey was conducted to gather information from peach procurement intermediaries in New Jersey and neighboring regions. The survey was conducted in person, by randomly selecting stores in southern and central New Jersey and Philadelphia. If the produce in-charge/supervisor was unavailable, the survey questionnaire in a pre-stamped and pre-addressed envelope was given to a

representative at the store. Additional site visits were made to various retail stores to gain firsthand insights into product placement, packaging practices, promotional displays, and sourcing patterns. These visits provided an opportunity to observe vendor marketing techniques and consumer-facing strategies without requiring follow-up interviews. Peach origin was verified through PLU codes, box labels, and informational tags. Institutional Review Board approval was secured before data collection.

The main objectives of the study were as follows:

- I. Develop a new survey instrument with the help of stakeholder input. The following survey questionnaire was developed after input from the New Jersey Peach Promotion Council, a few peach packing houses, produce procurement managers, and sales agents.
 1. Name of organization or location
 2. What is your preferred method of sourcing fresh peaches and Nectarines?
Check all that apply.
 - Marketing or sales entity
 - Directly from producers or growers
 - Directly from farm markets
 - Through an individual seller who delivers
 - Through a variety of specialist wholesalers
 - Through the wholesale market/terminal market
 3. Are you able to purchase at will from independent vendors?
 - Yes
 - No
 - All purchases go through the buying entity of a company.
 - If no, who performs the purchasing?
 4. What factors determine the selection within a specific commodity, i.e., why is one peach type bought in place of another?
 5. How many pounds/units of peaches are sold? And what percentage of the peach purchase is from local producers?
 6. How is the product placement in the department determined? Does the company plan it, or does the department manager/buyer have the ability to define it?
 7. Are specific pack sizes, product sizes, or ripeness required for the vendors?
 8. How often are orders placed, and what is the expected time between placing an order and its delivery?

9. What are the specific challenges in procuring New Jersey-grown peaches?

Check all that apply.

Difficult to find in all categories.

None (I buy it all in NJ)

Don't know where to buy from

Supply is inconsistent.

Quality is inconsistent.

Higher prices

Difficult relationships with the supplier

Other (if you chose other, please specify)

10. Would you source more NJ peaches if producers address these challenges?

Yes

No

Maybe

11. What suggestion do you have to promote local sourcing?

- II. Identify the purchase managers, store owners, or purchase agents who may be willing to participate in providing qualitative information. For this purpose, retail and wholesale operations in New Jersey and Pennsylvania, selling and sourcing New Jersey peaches, were contacted.
- III. Tabulate and analyze the survey data and make recommendations for the peach vendors to promote local peaches.
- IV. Develop recommendations for NJ peach producers.

Results and Discussion

Below is the summary of responses, including some quotes, to the preliminary survey of produce managers and buyers on behalf of their organization. A total of 23 responses were received.

1. Name of organizations or location.

The identifiers (name of the organization, etc.) were categorized as a types of organization as below.

- Two wholesalers

- One large-scale distributor
- Four packing houses (One multi-commodity large packing house and three peach-only packing houses)
- Five peach producers
- 11 retailers (4 national and seven regional)

2. What is your preferred method of sourcing fresh peaches?

- Distributors and wholesalers purchased peaches using marketing and sales entities.
- Regional retailers have greater flexibility in sourcing from distributors, wholesalers, or terminal markets. Small direct retailers mostly source peaches from the producers.

A major advantage for South Jersey peach growers is their proximity to high-population metro areas and big produce markets such as the Philadelphia Wholesale Produce Market and the Hunts Point Produce Market in New York City. According to one of the vendors at the Philadelphia produce market, the biggest advantage of NJ is getting a peach pallet within an hour of the call; just paying \$50 per pallet for transportation offers greater flexibility to the producers and vendors.

3. Do all purchases go through the buying entity of a company? If not, who performs the purchasing?

- Buyers can buy directly from growers, farmers, or distributors as needed.
- No specific percentage of products must be purchased through a centralized warehouse or company entity.
- Regional retailers prefer purchasing local peaches through a distributor until all options are exhausted, then to California.
- National retailers such as Walmart, Costco, and Wegmans used regional centralized warehouses to buy peaches.

4. What factors determine the sourcing? Why is one peach type bought in place of another?

- Availability and cost are the biggest determinants of the sourcing decision. However, if it's up to the store, they generally go for the prices.
- Direct retailers or farm stands consider customer expectations of specific types or shapes of peaches.
- The grower's relation with the purchasing entity is one of the most important but often ignored factors.

- “Trucks shipped out of the CA are in the \$8500 range versus the \$50+ per pallet paid for local delivery.”
- “We prefer local because they are much fresher. We lean towards taste and quality, with price coming next.”
- Some stores carry CA and local simultaneously to cover potential marketing/shelf display gaps.
- The manager and buyer have a relationship with local growers and will support them as long as possible.

Peach availability

In NJ, the typical peach season is late June to mid-September. Except for the extreme frost years, the State produces upwards of 30 million pounds of peaches. Until mid-July, the size of peaches is generally medium to large.

Because the CA has warmer temperatures, the peach season starts earlier. As a result, the larger and sweeter peaches arrive in sufficient quantity. NJ will have a sufficient quantity of peaches by the end of July; however, peach season peaks in the southern states, reducing the competitive price of NJ peaches. Post-September 1st, there were mostly California peaches, as NJ peaches had the last harvest done around that time.

Pricing and customer expectation

Prices of peaches within each category, such as white, yellow, nectarine, etc., were comparable, irrespective of the source. Regarding white peaches, CA fruit looked cleaner and more uniform than other regions, which has consumer appeal. In some instances, the price of CA peaches was discounted by up to 50 cents to bring it to the NJ price level. At most retail stores, the white peaches were \$2.99/lb., while the yellow peaches were \$1.99/lb. Peach prices ranged from \$0.99 to \$2.99 per pound; however, in the same store, the prices were mostly the same, irrespective of the origin of the region. NJ and CA peaches were the same price. White peaches and nectarines were generally higher priced compared to yellow peaches. White peaches from NJ were available at these stores in sufficient quantities only during some of the weeks. Flat peaches, also

known as donut peaches, fetched very high prices. It was never below \$3.99 per lb., significantly higher than the loose peaches (\$0.99 - \$1.33) and boxed peaches (\$0.99 – \$2.99). According to a few direct retailers, their donut peaches are in demand, and consumers are willing to buy them throughout the growing season if available. Due to their soft skin and susceptibility to bruising, growers refrain from planting flat peaches. However, if they were to be packed in specialty tray packs and harvested at the optimum time with the greatest care, flat/donut varieties would have great potential. Following COVID, shoppers at retail chains are increasingly looking for deals on produce, particularly due to inflation (Food Marketing Institute, 2024). Some local restaurants highlight their use of locally sourced peaches on their menus and amplify this message through social media, often gaining additional visibility as these posts are shared by others. There is strong customer loyalty and demand for the New Jersey fresh peaches (Robbins, 2019). Peaches sold at farm stands are typically very fresh and tree-ripened, resulting in superior flavor and commanding higher prices than those sold in stores. With no storage or transportation costs, farm stands also benefit from higher profit margins (Crisosto and Valero, 2008).

Improving grower relations

Until a decade or more ago, retail chains directly connected with producers, and they even visited growers' orchards and made purchases after looking at the quality parameters. This system no longer exists. Now, the onus is on peach producers to develop and maintain vendor relationships. Store produce managers are not directly involved in deciding on the supplier. A huge opportunity exists to sell more peaches by establishing long-term relationships with big buyers. For example, one of the national retail chains mostly sources Southern peaches, as its headquarters is in the southern state. Similarly, a regional retail chain, even though based in New Jersey, has traditionally sourced more peaches from California; however, it is willing to buy more peaches from New Jersey, which is a great opportunity to build further business.

5. How many pounds/units of peaches are sold? And what percentage of the peach purchase is from local producers?

- “Not sure.”
- Regional retailer – “I don't know, 70-80 % in peak season.”

The data on movement or purchases were not readily available to managers or buyers.

6. How is the product placement in the department determined? Does the company plan it, or does the department manager/buyer have the ability to define it?

- “We will determine what products move best at what cost and create a department layout to support it.”
- A distributor catering to the cooperative group of retail chains provides floor plans for their partner stores. Still, it is up to the managers to fine-tune and deliver “what/which” products.
- Some retail chain store managers have flexibility regarding where products can be placed in the store, and have no problem with giant displays for the customers.

CA and NJ peaches were offered and displayed next to each other at most retail stores; however, NJ had no big “push” or promotion. Jersey peaches have a Jersey Fresh sticker on the box. The produce manager was willing to display the Jersey Fresh banner or any promotional material on and around the display if it was provided to them by the sellers or the New Jersey Department of Agriculture.

7. Are specific pack sizes, product sizes, or ripeness required for the vendors?

- One national vendor preferred 2-layer tray packs, which average about 18–20 pounds. Sizes range from 48 to 64 counts, and another prefers 9 peach singular-layer trays in a cardboard box.
- “Distributors will request switching to bulk bags when the size is 2 ¼ inch or smaller.”
- “Prefer a 2¾ inch minimum; however, it does not need to be much bigger. Some customers prefer single-tray packs.”
- Buyers prefer tree ripe peaches that also maintain firmness, a combination that ensures both flavor and shelf stability. While this dual expectation can be challenging, many New Jersey varieties such as those developed by Rutgers are specifically bred to balance ripeness and firmness. This makes New Jersey peaches well-positioned to meet these market demands compared to some out-of-state alternatives.

8. How often are orders placed, and what is the expected time between placing an order and its delivery?
 - “As needed for wholesale and usually a delivery 2+ days later. Pickups can happen quicker.”
 - “It is very easy to work with local growers to schedule deliveries/pickups/etc.”
 - “Jersey peach vendors do an excellent job of getting products to them for stores.”
9. What are the specific challenges in procuring New Jersey-grown peaches and nectarines?
 - For wholesalers, the growers may only offer peaches or just one commodity, making it difficult to “round out” or make the order worth the logistical costs. Also, there is an overlap of production from the southern states initially.
 - “Jersey Fresh Coop should extend the promotions instead of immediately switching to apples.”

Category creation

The quality of NJ peaches is generally more consistent than the out-of-state peaches throughout the season; however, the NJ peach industry can benefit if it takes a leaf out of the marketing tactics of CA peaches—for example, the branding of the specific fruit quality on the box itself.

- “Tree ripe” is an interesting category from CA, even though its appearance, quality, and sweetness are not very different from some of the NJ peaches. To counter that, a new label such as “NJ Ripe” can be used.
- “Extra-firm” peaches are a new category. These peaches appeal to consumers seeking a convenient, mess-free snacking option, distinct from typical fresh-eating peaches that are often juicy and require careful handling. The novel variety ‘Gloria’, developed by Rutgers University, has a firmer texture, making it ideal for on-the-go consumption. Branding it as the “Neat Peach” emphasizes its clean, non-drippy eating experience. While precise production volumes vary annually, several commercial orchards in New Jersey have adopted ‘Gloria’.

providing a reliable supply to support targeted marketing and niche consumer outreach.

- Another example is a medium-sized sweet peach from California marketed as 'Peppermint' peaches due to their distinctive striped color.
- While excess fuzz is generally considered a non-preferable trait, Georgia successfully markets them as "FUZZIES" peaches! This type of marketing by category creation is an idea that can be applied to specific varieties with specific traits. New Jersey producers could enhance the Jersey Fresh logo by including variety-specific traits or origin details to better engage consumers. Additionally, there is considerable potential for expanded promotional efforts to highlight the unique qualities of local peaches.

10. What suggestion do you have to promote local sourcing?

- The season should be extended as long as possible, in the middle of Sept.
- Quality, price, and availability are good from NJ growers. Still, some may only offer peaches, where the buyer is looking to "fill a truck" or "round out" and order by adding additional stone fruit/commodities to their order.
- "Good eating quality peach is the priority."
- "Yellow peaches must be a bit tangy, and white must be sub-acid; however, the fruit must taste sweet with greater than 11 brix in all cases".
- "Single layer tray, the proper packaging."
- "Prefer tree-ripe peaches but something that can maintain the firmness."
- "Fuzz is a consideration. Low pubescence peaches are preferable."
- "We can alternate between CA and non-CA peaches every week."

Recommendations for a peach vendor to promote local peaches in New Jersey

- Enhance In-Store Promotion Based on Manager Willingness: Several store produce managers indicated they would display "Jersey Fresh" banners or other promotional materials if provided. Vendors should supply signage, variety details, or origin labels to help increase visibility of New Jersey peaches, particularly when local and out-of-state peaches are displayed side-by-side.
- Support Buyer Education on Varieties and Quality Attributes: Survey responses suggested that store managers are open to featuring local peaches but often lack

detailed knowledge about available varieties or seasonal quality. Vendors can assist by sharing brief educational materials or product information sheets on flavor profiles, ripeness standards, or handling characteristics, which may help stores make informed display and procurement decisions.

- Extend Visibility Through Mid-September: Respondents noted that promotional efforts often shift to apples before the NJ peach season ends. Vendors can collaborate with the Jersey Fresh Cooperative and retail partners to continue promotional activities into mid-September, as NJ peaches are still harvested through that period in most years.
- Address Logistical Limitations for Wholesalers: Some wholesale buyers indicated a challenge in "rounding out" truckloads when NJ producers offer only peaches. Vendors can coordinate with multiple producers or cooperatives to provide a broader mix of commodities (e.g., other stone fruits) to meet buyer expectations and reduce shipment inefficiencies.
- Respond to Preferences for Tree-Ripe Yet Firm Fruit: Retailers expressed a preference for peaches that are tree-ripe, yet maintain firmness, to balance flavor and shelf-life. Vendors should emphasize varieties such as Rutgers-bred cultivars that meet these traits and educate buyers on how they meet these dual demands.
- Capitalize on Consumer Loyalty to NJ Peaches: Vendors can leverage the strong consumer interest in local produce, as noted in store interviews and observations, by supplying peaches with orchard-level branding or "Jersey Fresh" stickers, which can differentiate them from out-of-state options even when priced similarly.
- Work with Retailers on Placement Flexibility: Several managers confirmed that product placement decisions are not rigidly set by company policies and can be adjusted based on what moves well. Vendors can work with receptive managers to suggest prominent placement strategies, especially when NJ peaches are fresh and competitively priced.

By implementing these recommendations, a peach vendor can contribute to the promotion and success of local peaches in NJ, fostering better collaboration between growers, vendors, and consumers.

Recommendations for New Jersey peach and nectarine producers

- Communicate Crop Availability and Seasonality Effectively: Retailers noted gaps in the supply of New Jersey peaches, especially during the early and late parts of the season. Although frost damage was not directly cited, respondents emphasized the need for clear communication about crop volumes and seasonal availability. Producers should regularly share updates on harvest timelines and expected availability so that buyers can plan procurement and promotions in advance.
- Improve Grading Consistency and Visual Quality Standards: Inconsistent quality was identified as a challenge by several vendors. Producers are encouraged to adopt consistent grading standards that address size, firmness, and visual appearance. Respondents noted that uniform and clean fruit, especially white peaches, appeal more to consumers. Strengthening quality control measures can help retailers develop trust in New Jersey peaches.
- Introduce or Expand Late Season Varieties to Extend Market Presence: Respondents indicated a desire to continue sourcing New Jersey peaches into September. To meet this demand, producers can grow varieties that mature later in the season. This would allow retailers to carry local fruit for a longer period and reduce the need to switch prematurely to peaches from other states.
- Provide Packaging That Meets Buyer Expectations: Buyers mentioned specific preferences for packaging formats, including two-layer trays with designated fruit counts and bulk bags for smaller fruit. Specialty peaches like donut peaches are in demand but require careful handling. Using padded or single-layer packaging can protect delicate varieties and maintain their market value.

- Strengthen In-Store Branding and Promotion Through Retail Partnerships: While New Jersey peaches are available in stores, they often lack prominent promotional signage unless retailers are supplied with materials. Producers should collaborate with marketing partners to provide visual aids such as Jersey Fresh stickers, banners, or cards highlighting origin and variety. Store managers stated they are willing to use these materials when provided.
- Build and Maintain Relationships With Buyers: Although purchasing decisions are sometimes centralized, respondents emphasized the influence of relationships. Producers should build consistent communication with procurement teams and store managers. Regular updates, in-season visits, and follow-up discussions after harvest can help establish long-term buyer confidence.
- Align With Preferences for Firm and Flavorful Peaches: Survey results showed that buyers prefer peaches that are tree ripe yet firm enough to handle transportation and shelf life. Rutgers-developed varieties like Gloria were mentioned as being well suited for this purpose. Promoting these traits and matching them with market needs can strengthen the competitive position of New Jersey peaches.
- Expand Commodity Offerings Where Possible: Some wholesalers expressed difficulty ordering from growers who only offer peaches. When feasible, producers can collaborate with others or diversify plantings to include other types of fruits. This would help fulfill mixed-load requirements and make sourcing from New Jersey more efficient for distributors.

Conclusions

The survey findings highlight several recurring themes that are critical for strengthening the presence of New Jersey peaches in the retail market. Among the most frequently reported responses, availability and cost emerged as the primary factors influencing peach sourcing decisions. Retailers noted a clear preference for locally grown peaches due to their freshness, taste, and lower transportation costs, yet emphasized that

consistent supply and quality remain challenges that limit wider adoption. Promotional gaps persist, particularly when New Jersey and California peaches are displayed side by side with little visual differentiation.

Buyers repeatedly stated their preference for peaches that are tree ripe yet firm, to balance eating quality and shelf stability. Rutgers-developed varieties that meet these specifications were viewed favorably. The need for better communication from producers regarding harvest timelines and expected availability was also noted, especially during the early and late parts of the season.

In summary, the disconnect between producers and the retail environment lies in part with limited information flow, inconsistent product presentation, and the absence of targeted promotions. To address these issues, growers should work closely with regional retailers to promote their fruit using signage, origin labels, and branding tools like the Jersey Fresh logo. Managers and buyers need support in understanding variety characteristics, packaging formats, and seasonal timing, especially when introducing later-ripening varieties. Finally, consumer education campaigns, both in-store and online, can help build awareness and increase demand for New Jersey peaches at the retail level.

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