

Sierra foothills celebrate mandarin harvest

By Jeff Peline, Sacramento Bee

When it comes to finding farm-fresh citrus, most people think of Florida or California's San Joaquin Valley. But the Sierra foothills are home to the crème de la crème of citrus: the mountain mandarin.

The mandarin is a true citrus experience. It has a sweet and tangy scent, is seedless, convenient to eat and healthy. No utensils are needed as you peel back the rind to reveal a fruit that Mother Nature has split into even segments. None of the juice squirts all over you, either.

Mountain mandarins (a variety known as Owari Satsuma) are one of the "super" foods – very high in vitamin C. They also contain significant amounts of synephrine, a natural product that can help relieve cold symptoms.

"Mountain mandarins are a unique crop that combines delicious flavor with easy peeling," says Josh Huntsinger, Placer County's agricultural commissioner. "Their higher-elevation growing conditions contribute to a level of flavor and sweetness that can't be matched by Valley-grown fruit."

The dozens of orchards in Placer County – first planted in the 1880s by Welsh settlers – are spread throughout rural Auburn, Newcastle, Penryn, Loomis and Lincoln. More than 30 growers in the county form the Mountain Mandarin Growers' Association. During harvest season, you can visit their orchards, buy a bag of freshly picked mandarins and meet the farmers.

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