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California cherries are good to go - Sunday, June 12, 2011

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Katy Raddatz / The Chronicle 2006 - California cherries will be in stores for the next three weeks, after which varieties will come from Oregon and Washington.

It's high time for cherries, as the California harvest is at its peak after a harsh winter and spring. However, the unusually heavy rain we've had recently has lowered the amount of fruit for many farmers.

Al Courchesne of Frog Hollow Farm in Brentwood says he has lost about 20 percent of his crop because of the rain causing the cherries to split.

The water sits in the cavity right around the skin, he says. "It gets into the fruit, and the fruit expands. Meanwhile, the water is softening the skin, so it cracks from the extra pressure."

Still, the fruit in the markets now - primarily the Bing variety - is bright, crisp and sweet. Local cherries should be in stores for about three more weeks, and then the harvest will come in from Oregon and Washington.

How to select: Color is an important quality factor and changes depending on what variety of cherry you're selecting. For example, look for cherries with a deep color for the Bing variety and a rosy yellow color for Rainiers. Fresh skin will be shiny and a matte skin indicates over-ripeness. Berries with greener stems tend to be fresher. A brown or woody stem means they're older.

How to store: Cherries like the cold. Store them in the refrigerator in a plastic bag or wrapped with plastic wrap in a bowl. In this cold climate, cherries can last two to three weeks.

How to use: Aside from gorging on them out of hand, add them to salads, make a dessert cherry soup, poach and eat over ice cream, make a cobbler or freeze to have in the off season. Stem and pit the cherries before freezing them to make it easier on yourself later.