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Critical period for SC peach crop

Published: Sunday, March 23, 2008 - 7:18 am
Updated: Sunday, March 23, 2008 - 2:19 pm

By Nan Lundeen
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There's a lot riding on the temperature gauge for the next couple of weeks for South Carolina peach growers and those of us who love biting into a fresh, juicy peach.

"We have the ideal type of weather that we're looking for -- mostly warm, sunny days and nights that aren't too cool, and our peach bloom is progressing as we hoped it would," said Dr. Desmond Layne. He's professor of horticulture at Clemson University and state peach specialist.

What's critical, he said, is that temperatures don't drop into the low 20s. Peaches can tolerate numbers as low as 28 degrees F., but lower than that, watch out.

Last year the \$50 million peach industry took a severe blow with a freeze on Easter weekend, April 7 and 8.

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Tom Fisher of Greer was among the growers whose crop was wiped out last year, and at this point his orchards are partly "in the pink."

In the peach business, that means the bud is ready to burst into glorious rosy shades of pink blossoms. After the bloom, the petals fall off, and that's called "petal fall," the 62-year old grower explained. Then comes the "shuck split," expected about April 10, which exposes the

minuscule peach.

"That's when they're the most vulnerable," Fisher said.

All told, Fisher has about 250 acres of peaches this year. He's leasing Lem Dillard's orchards and his fruit stand (but not Dillard's ice cream parlor, he's quick to add), and operates the Fisher's fruit stand at State 290 and State 101.

South Carolina ranks second in the nation for size of peach acreage with 17,000 acres, behind California's 90,000 acres and ahead of Georgia's 15,000, Layne said.

Layne said that 95 percent of large growers depend on a federal H2A guest worker program. "I anticipate we won't have a shortage of labor," he said. It's an expensive



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Tommy Fisher walks through his peach orchard north of Greer Thursday afternoon.

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program for growers because they must provide guaranteed hours, wages, housing and transportation, but "The farmer needs a skilled labor force to do these types of things," he said.

The farm work lasts about six months and includes many tasks in addition to harvesting such as pruning, thinning, irrigating, packing and shipping.

Layne urged South Carolinians to buy locally grown fruit if they want peaches that are fresh and tasty.

If the temperatures cooperate, they'll be available at roadside stands and local markets by the first two weeks of May and run through mid-September.

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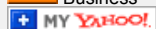
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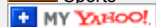
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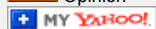
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