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Fruitful evolution

October 23, 2007, 12:00 a.m. EST

by **Matt Wake** ([Contact](#) / [Staff Bio](#))

CLEMSON — South Carolina tree-fruit farmers have their backs against the wall. And it isn't the lack of water that's produced the pickle.

This spring was especially warm in the Palmetto State. The temperature caused crops to advance very quickly; buds flowered and fruit was produced. Over the Easter weekend, the thermometer swung abruptly in the opposite direction. Temperatures in the low-20s produced a fatal frost. Fruit tissue is not designed for such hardship, and the output froze, perished and fell to the earth. The icy phenomenon last occurred here in 1996.

"Most of our growers lost 80 percent of their crops because of the freeze," said Desmond Lane, professor of horticulture at Clemson University. "There's not a whole lot a farmer can do at that point. It's pretty devastating and means a very significant loss of profitability. For some growers it might be questionable as to whether they will stay in business."

Sure, some farmers might have crop insurance, but the policies only help recoup production expenses — fertilizer, labor, etc. — not lost profits. And those funds will not be accessible until next fall at the earliest. Federal disaster assistance is another possible reprieve. This measure requires Gov. Mark Sanford to declare a state of disaster and the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture to approach Congress for assistance. Disaster aid would take even longer to materialize than crop insurance — if the dough is even available.

"As everyone knows, we're involved in war," Lane said. "There's not a lot of discretionary money in the federal budget, even if they declare a disaster."

Although South Carolina's peach and apple production will be paltry, strawberries have been a boon. But there are only around 300 acres of strawberries being farmed in state. One commercial peach grower can tend as much as 3,000 acres. The state has more than 50 individual peach farms, which can be as small as 10 to 15 acres. In addition, around 20 apple farmers work operations of 10 to 50 acres.

Agricultural academics, such as Lane, routinely preach crop diversity. By cultivating more than one product, the growers' chance of sustaining a knockout blow is greatly increased. It's a key to select crops that can be processed into value-added products — think preserves, ciders and so forth. Farmers can also make ends meet by hosting agro-centric events, like harvest festivals, where they can sell their products and arts and crafts.

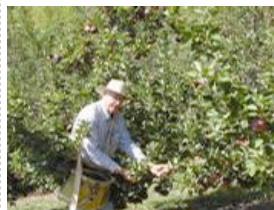
Dick Perdue is a testament to Lane's mantra. On his farm on Highway 11, Perdue produces 18 kinds of fruit. He grows 120 varieties — 30 types of apples alone. Unfortunately, 70 percent of Perdue's apple crop was lost to the Easter frost. But there was triumph within that failure: His golden delicious output was sterling. Perdue also had prolific tallies for blackberries, muscadine and bunch grapes and raspberries. He estimates his usual six-figure sales numbers will be down 40 percent.

"I'm not a conventional farmer," Perdue said. "That diversity has really helped me this year probably better than many other farmers in the state."

The 3,000 fruit trees at Perdue's Mountain Fruit Farm are concentrated on some 20-odd acres. The hillside layout of the farm helped Perdue salvage some of his apples. By planting on steep slopes, the trees are kept as much as 10 degrees warmer on a cold night.

In addition to being sold in bushels, Perdue turns his apples into premium cider. Cider available in grocery stores costs around \$3. However, a gallon of Perdue's stuff brings \$6 a gallon. He's also developed a method of vacuum packaging his peanuts green for prime taste after boiling.

Photo Gallery




South Carolina tree-fruit farmers

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"A small farmer has to direct market; they can't make any money by wholesaling," Perdue said.

Perdue's agricultural breadth is even more amazing considering his age and infrastructure. At 77, Perdue still personally collects around 200 to 300 bushels of apples a day during harvest. He also planted every tree and vine at Mountain Fruit Farm himself. The septuagenarian still prunes berry bushes and sprays pest control around the angled terrain. Six part-time workers provide Perdue's only support.

It's a strange retirement. When Perdue bought the farm (literally) 15 years ago, he had just bid farewell to a 38-year career as an engineer with Cryovac. This past life proved to be crucial in developing efficient packaging solutions for his foodstuffs.

"I didn't want to be like my parents and grandparents and sit down and die," Perdue said. "I wanted to have an active lifestyle and could think of no other endeavor that would challenge me as much physically and mentally. I'm probably in better health today than 20 years ago."

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