

Oconee Today

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“A Peach of a Fruit”

By RAY CHANDLER

If one fruit says summer, it might well be the peach.

After all, it's possible to have a new variety ripen for the purpose and pleasure of getting your face wet and sticky every week of the season. And that's one of the reasons South Carolina fruit growers have turned to it in groves.

“Our first varieties ripen about mid May and others ripen all the way into September,” said Desmond Layne, Clemson professor of horticulture and the state's appointed peach specialist.

That's one of the reasons the peach offers fruit growers hope of thriving in times that have seen other fruits, notably the apple, begin to lose ground, literally, in the face of such pressures as erratic weather, rising production and transport costs and competition from imports. Some of those very factors, as it happens, might be a boon to growers who can adapt to changing market forces.

Layne, along with others with the Clemson University extension program recently held a program on peaches, their varieties and growing peculiarities, at the Musser Fruit Research Farm, at Oconee Point, near Seneca that attracted peach growers from across the state as well as Georgia and North Carolina.

Underscored was the importance of the state's \$50 million a year peach growing industry that, beginning in the 1860s, has now made South Carolina, with about 18,000 acres in commercial orchards, the second largest peach producing state in the nation, behind California, which holds 50 percent of the market.

Currently, South Carolina produces about 15 percent of the nation's crop, in about 40 main varieties, far ahead of third place Georgia, “The Peach State”.

Even Oconee County's traditional apple growers, who despite declining numbers still hold nearly a third of the state's apple acreage are turning to the fuzzy fruit.

“It gives them a longer growing and producing season,” said Howard Hiller, Clemson extension agent with the Walhalla extension office. “As Desmond said, they can have ripening fruit all summer with the right varieties, instead of just one picking season about early September.”

While there are no clear estimates available of the peach acreage in Oconee County, Hiller said he believed all the county's remaining apple growers had some peach trees planted.

And while peaches have the same vulnerabilities as apples to frosts, they can make out better in drier weather, according to Layne.

Two inches of rain a week would be optimum, according to Layne, but even with less, growers can see good yields. Drier weather can mean less chance of diseases that thrive on moisture, and leads almost certainly to sweeter peaches.

“We've been dry this year,” he said. “The peaches might be a little smaller than they could be, but they're great.”

Two factors, Layne said, give local growers across the state reason to be optimistic.

One is the rising cost of transporting food from far off places, which is a plus for local growers that can offset other problems.

“At the current price of fuel, it can cost \$9,000 to ship a truckload of peaches from California to South Carolina,” he said. “That adds about \$4 a box to the cost of the peaches.”

A local grower could operate on the same margin and sell at a cheaper price.

Another edge for the local grower is the growing trend toward consumers wanting to buy locally produced food.

“In some cases, people want to know the farmer who grows it,” he said.

It’s the task of Layne and others at the Musser Farm to do the work that helps growers make the right decisions about what varieties they want to grow.

“When you plant trees, you’re making decisions that will affect you 15 years into the future,” Layne said. “Growers need the best information and education we can give them to make the right decisions.”

The 240 acre Musser Farm is the laboratory where trees of new varieties are cultivated and evaluated for their quality and hardiness, as well as specifically where they might be best grown. While some varieties, such as the common Red Globe, might grow reasonably well almost anywhere, other peaches will show marked preferences for certain soil conditions, doing much better in the sandier soils nearer the coast, for instance, than in the loam and clays of the Upstate.

Other evaluations, Layne said, are carried out on grower’s farms.

It can be a complex science, this testing of peaches, far beyond the mere taste test. Samples of varieties are evaluated for size and sugar content, and in some cases it literally is an acid test.

“The traditional Southern taste in peaches runs to the yellow peach, sweet but with a little acid that gives it a twang,” Layne said. “Some of the white peaches are sweet but have much lower acid.”

In the changing world, Layne said, the acid content itself might weigh heavily in a grower’s decision of what to plant.

Asian communities tend to favor the sweet, low acid types, he said, because those are the varieties grown in China—where the peach originated and which is still the world’s leading peach producer, with 45 percent of the world’s acreage.

“Growers who live near cities with large Asian communities and plan to ship there, might want to consider planting these varieties,” he said.

In every case, through sound research and best planting and growing practices, the future of the commercial peach seems decidedly less fuzzy.

For more information on Desmond Layne’s advice on peach growing, see his webpage at www.clemson.edu/hort/peach/index.php