

So Far, Cherry Season Looks As Sweet As Ever

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NEW DANVILLE (Lancaster Co.) — Despite dire predictions of complete fruit loss and possible fruit tree damage, orchardists have looked on their trees with mild — maybe even mildly excited — surprise.

A blast of cold arctic air invaded the area in mid-March, sending flower lovers scurrying to protect buds and bulbs and causing a lot of worries for apricot, peach, and cherry growers.

But with growing fruit and vegetable crops, nothing is simple to predict.

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"The bloom looks real good," he said during a tour of his farm Wednesday morning.

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tions at the New Danville location, may have figured in their survival during the mid-March cold spell, according to Lancaster County horticulture agent Tim Elkner.

Overall, according to Elkner, fruit from apricot trees in many orchards look almost completely lost because of the fruit's cold susceptibility. But cherry and peach growers are reporting mild, if any, damage to the crops.

The same with Haas. Haas has been growing cherry trees at the orchard for 35 years. There are about 60 acres in cherries, making him one of the largest sweet cherry growers in the region.

He maintains about 25 different varieties of cherries with a focus on about 5-6 varieties. Haas also grows about five acres of sour cherries.

The farm is about 95 percent pick your own, Haas noted.

While weather has crops about 2½ weeks ahead of schedule, the season should open about June 20 or maybe earlier, said Haas. The cherry picking season lasts until about July 15-20. Cherries go for



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about \$1 a pound.

During the tour, many trees were blooming rapidly with little or no damage to any of the buds. Inspections early Wednesday morning turned up no damage from the March cold.

Several rows were located up on ridges, many planted on the Conestoga silt loam soils.

Recently, bee colonies were shipped in to help with tree pollination. About 240 colonies, numbering about 20,000-30,000 bees each, were placed on the orchard.

Years ago, Haas completed work on identifying and planting sweet cherry varieties that work for his soil and climate conditions. Some of the heavy clay subsoil has proven a challenge — in many cases, good topsoil is used to provide "berms" or ridges for trees to grow on. The rows are in sod cover.

Haas indicated there are five conditions he observes when selecting sweet cherry varieties. They are:

1. Do they live? Can they be productive under the soil and climatic conditions of the orchard?
2. Do the varieties taste good? Are they what consumers want?
3. Are the sweet cherries free from cracking?
4. Is the fruit size large enough?
5. Do they provide fruit early



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enough?

If the trees meet those conditions, "they're part of our Big 5 varieties," said Haas.

One variety, "Bing," is not grown at the orchard because of soil and climate conditions.

There are other essential management considerations. Haas noted that, when pruning, it is important to maintain uniformity and get rid of weak or deadened branches. Last summer, the "weak wood" branches were removed from the interiors of trees to provide more sunlight for the cherries and air flow.

Haas sprays to control brown rot. He uses a balanced fertilizer spread under the trees.

Haas has fumigated for nematode control. No irrigation is used on the sweet cherry trees.

About 5-6 varieties are persistent, cold hearty, and consistently produce a crop. These persistent varieties are shallow-rooted and do well on the challenging soil conditions of the farm.

In one row, no cold damage as evident. Haas said, "All are alive here. They look real good."

Along with extension agent Tim

Elkner, Haas opened up several of the buds to examine the bud's ovary. All looked healthy and vibrant, ready for pollination.

Also, Haas inspected some of the colonies of bees. One box contained about 100,000 bees, comprised of about six colonies. More sunlight in the next several days will help the bees to leave the boxes to do their work.

Haas noted that new trees, comprised of German root stock, cost him a lot in simple royalties for the "use" of the stock at \$3 a tree. Overall, sweet cherry trees cost him about \$8-\$10 per tree, compared to about \$4-\$6 for apple trees.

Cherry Hill Orchards is also home to about 25 acres of nectarines, 20 acres of peaches, 50 acres of apples, 1½ acres of apricots, and 1½ acres of plums.

Overall, however, cherry trees are the most challenging to grow, "no question about it," Haas said.

"It's an art form," said Haas. "After 35 years, you hope to develop (these) skills — to find out what works and what doesn't, what survives and what doesn't."



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