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Lovers of Gloucester County peach blossoms get an early show

By Jessica Driscoll

April 7, 2010, Gloucester County Times -- Bright pink peach blossoms have popped up in Gloucester County's farms and orchards more than a week sooner than normal after an early warm spell. Residents are being encouraged to view their short-lived beauty this week.

"It's that time of year that they're in full bloom and I've always had a group of people who call me and want to know when they can see the blossoms," said Jerry Frecon, agricultural agent with Rutgers New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station Cooperative Extension of Gloucester County. "The tour educates people that we still have a peach industry in Gloucester County and the blossoms are one of the prettier aspects of agriculture." The 2010 Peach Blossom Tour begins at Zee Orchards on Route 322, just off Route 55, and continues to the Heritage Station Vineyard in Richwood past several peach farms. Driving directions can be found on the Cooperative Extension Web site at <http://gloucester.njaes.rutgers.edu>.

Rich Heritage of Heritage Station said the farm usually gets its last frost followed by a week of good sunshine before the blossoms pop.

"They'll bloom for about another week and then all the leaves will come out with edible fruit ready in mid-July," said Heritage. "Peach orchards have been diminishing in the area mainly due to a lot of fruit coming in from the West Coast and overseas. We make the most money from the sale of our peach wine."

Heritage's parents, Penni and Bill, acquired the farm from his grandfather and the property has shrunk to 150 acres. Heritage Station now mainly grows apples, pears and peaches and also has grape vineyards.

"We have probably 50 or 60 acres of peaches," said Rich Heritage. "We're pruning them now so they don't get too bushy and to ensure the branches that are left produce the highest quality peaches. If they're too crowded, the peaches will be much smaller."

Heritage grows yellow peaches, white peaches and flat "donut" peaches. Heritage said the peach wine is a huge seller because tree-ripened peaches grown right on the orchard produce a fantastic flavor.

"The only thing we really worry about with the blossoms is that a frost or freeze could make them fall and kill the fruit," said Heritage. "Weather patterns have been extremely odd over the last year with record snowfall this year and a lot of rain last summer. Both peaches and grapes need a lot of sun to ripen so we're hoping to get that and we like the heat because we want to see the trees in bloom."

Heritage said all of the trees are hand-pruned and harvested and that the peaches, as in most New Jersey farms, are grown for quality instead of mass production.

"It's a shame the blossoms are so short-lived," said Heritage. "A lot of my friends in town didn't even know about them. That's a sign of the classic disconnect with agriculture, especially in my generation."

Heritage said his great-grandfather first planted the peaches and they quickly became the cash crop. Now, he said, there's no way the farm would survive on peaches alone.

At Heilig Orchards, also in Harrison Township, Carl Heilig said he's seeing "one of the heaviest blooms in a long time."

"With all the moisture this winter and the early hot weather, they bloomed about 10 days earlier than usual," said Heilig. "I think they'll only last about five days this year. We're still doing a little bit of pruning and we're doing some blossom thinning, which will help the fruit size later on. I expect a big crop of peaches this year because right now is the time that they're most susceptible to be hurt by cold weather and I don't see a sign of that happening. We like a good spring."

Heilig said he believes the peach blossom tour is good for the local farms.

"It's something different because people don't get to look at blooms like these everyday," said Heilig. "We have 250 acres of peaches and we also grow apples. As far as the crops go, we usually start seeing edible peaches around the fourth of July but I think this year it might be about a week earlier."

According to the Cooperative Extension, the county has a long history of peach production with Harrison Township being the center of the industry. As orchards have been lost to commercial, educational and housing developments, more of the peach industry has moved to Elk and South Harrison townships as well as Salem and Cumberland Counties. The last census has the peach industry as having more than 6,000 acres in New Jersey, with 65 percent of that lying within Gloucester County.