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**CONTACT:** Pegi Adam, 973-744-6090, [pegi@mountsnow.org](mailto:pegi@mountsnow.org)  
Jerry Frecon, 856-307-6450, [frecon@rcrc.rutgers.edu](mailto:frecon@rcrc.rutgers.edu)

## **Peach trees in full bloom in South Jersey**

By Edward Colimore  
Inquirer Staff Writer

*April 9, 2010, Philadelphia Inquirer* -- As far as the eye could see, the landscape was ablaze with frilly pink and salmon blossoms of peach trees, aligned in neat rows across Harrison Township in Gloucester County.

The sight rivaled the cherry blossoms in Washington and turned the heads of motorists passing Zee Orchards, off Routes 322 and 55.

For more than 50 years, Gloucester has been the No. 1 county for peach production in New Jersey, with 4,600 acres of orchards.

Every April, the land draws admirers who follow a self-guided blossom tour developed by Jerry Frecon, agricultural agent for the Rutgers Cooperative Extension of Gloucester County.

But this season - with a few days of temperatures close to 90 degrees - the trees began blooming earlier than usual and will likely be at their showy best only through this weekend.

The trees "are loaded with blossoms right now," Frecon said. "You get some 80-degree temperatures, and that pushes things along. They won't last long."

Frecon started the tour about 15 years ago and modifies it as needed "so people can see the most peach trees," he said. "I want to maximize their exposure" to the blossoms.

"We've had a good winter, not too cold but just right to overwinter a full crop of flower buds on most trees," he said. "Even though we may not be ready to have them bloom, the trees know when it is time to wake up, flower, and begin producing little peaches."

The flowering vistas - so long a part of the peach industry centered in the Richwood area of Harrison Township - are threatened, though.

"Each year, there are fewer trees because we're losing the land to commercial, housing, and educational development," Frecon said as he walked over a part of Zee Orchards.

Much of the peach industry has moved to Elk and South Harrison Townships in Gloucester County and farther south to Salem and Cumberland Counties. Peach orchards cover about 6,600 acres in the state and produce about 68 million pounds of fruit annually.

"Some of the farmers are getting older and getting out of the business," Frecon said, and the younger generation leaves farming once it sees "the hard work, risks, and low benefits."

On one day in August 2008, three hailstorms devastated orchards in Harrison Township. Forty-five percent of the peaches at Zee Orchards were destroyed.

But on Thursday, owner Doug Zee, 68, of Mullica Hill, was all smiles as he looked forward to another season. Zee's first JerZee peaches will be picked in late June and the last in September.

If the weather cooperates, about 34,500 bushels will be harvested, and some of the fruit will be shipped as far as Iceland.

"This is the best bloom we've had in a decade," Zee said. "It's been quick and pretty, and should lead to good peaches."

Zee's father, Wilmer, began the orchard in 1943 with the purchase of 64 acres for \$26,000. The farm grew to several hundred acres, with small portions devoted to nectarines, apples, and plums.

Zee sold more than 200 acres to Rowan University about 10 years ago because of financial difficulties but still farms the land under an agreement with the college until it is developed.

"The weather has cooperated up until today," said Doug Zee Jr., 47, of Mullica Hill. "This heat and dry weather is perfect for the blooms. They'll probably hang on until about Monday."

This season, the blooms appeared about 10 days earlier than normal. About 15 to 20 percent of the flowers are needed to make a full crop of fruit, Frecon said.

"So we can use some natural thinning if a slight amount of subfreezing temperatures occur," he said. "Statistically, there is a higher probability of low-temperature injury this early."

Frecon's peach-blossom tour focuses on Harrison and Elk Townships, though there are also some blooming peach orchards in nearby South Harrison and Mantua. It begins at Zee Orchards and ends at Heritage Station, on Route 322 west of Richwood.

"It may not be many more years until many of these orchards are gone," Frecon said as he walked through Zee Orchards, where long lines of flowering trees were divided by ribbons of grass.

The Gloucester County Farm Preservation program has saved some orchards, and the economic downturn has put much development on hold, Frecon said.

But when the economy rebounds, the pressure to develop the land will return. "It's just my opinion, but I think this may be more like Cherry Hill and Voorhees someday," the elder Zee said