

Mild weather good for peach crop, but a freeze could hurt it

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ANDERSON — Cold days are over in the Upstate for this week, and mild temperatures continue to draw a stark contrast with last year's winter weather.

Today will be mostly sunny with a high of 63 degrees and a low of 41 at night. Clouds will form overnight and are forecast to last until Thursday morning.

This week brings highs of 65 degrees Wednesday and Thursday, the first two days of February. That's about 10 degrees higher than normal, according to National Weather Service records. Last year February began with a high of 44 and a low of 39. Normal temperatures for Feb. 1 fall between a low of 33 degrees and a high of 54.

Sunshine will return Friday, warming to 60. A cold front from the Northwest will come through Saturday, when the high will be 55, said James Oh, a meteorologist at the National Weather Service.

"We're seeing seasonal average temperatures by that time," he said.

They won't last long. The Climate Prediction Center forecast predicts dry days and above-normal temperatures through April, Oh said.

While January received more than 4 inches of rain, it still does not make up for a deficit the Upstate has been building for a year. Anderson, Oconee and Pickens counties have remained in severe third-level drought since November.

January rainfall totaled 4.32 inches, 0.73 inches shy of normal rainfall, according to the National Weather Center.

The Upstate's major bodies of water benefited, specifically Hartwell Lake. It gained 0.30 inches in the past week, standing at 652.89 feet Monday, according to U.S. Army Corps of Engineer records. Lake Jocassee gained three feet, standing 21 feet below full pool level. Lake Keowee, supplier to Duke's Oconee Nuclear Station, dropped 2 feet, standing 5 feet below full pool level.

The Upstate peach crop thrives on warm weather even if it's early as long as no below-freezing temperatures follow, said Desmond Layne, a peach specialist at Clemson University.

If temperatures linger in the 70s for a week, that makes the fruit more vulnerable to possible frost. Peach blossom buds can endure weather 20 degrees Fahrenheit, Layne said, but once they bloom, a 29-degree freeze will kill them.

"Most of our growers don't breathe a sigh of relief until probably April," he said.

If mild weather persists until spring, consumers enjoy a long peach season and growers beat competitors to the fruit stand.

California is South Carolina's biggest peach competition, Layne said, and if its spring comes later that's even better for the Palmetto State.



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