

## Specialty Crops

# Plenty of California Peaches & Nectarines Expected in 2001

Despite some adverse winter and spring weather, California should produce a plentiful supply of peaches and nectarines this year. The state is expected to harvest a plum crop even lighter than last year's below-average crop, however. California's stone fruit (peach, nectarine, and plum) orchards—which account for most of U.S. stone fruit production—have received less rainfall than usual, even with heavy rains in early March and early April. With most of these orchards equipped with pumps and wells, crop moisture requirements have been met thus far. Still, California's stone fruit growers continue to worry about water supply shortages, especially this summer.

Part of the blame for the predicted smaller plum crop lies with the heavy early-March rains and part with an April hail storm. The rains hampered bee pollination of plum varieties that were already in full bloom. (They had no effect on early-variety self-pollinating peaches and nectarines.) Also contributing to the decline in plum production is the switch by some producers to pluots, a hybrid of plums and apricots, by grafting onto plum limbs.

The hail storm swept California's stone fruit orchards on April 7, after all varieties of peaches, nectarines, and plums had set fruit. While the ultimate damage from the storm remains uncertain, industry sources indicated that nectarines and plums seem most affected, perhaps because their smooth skin offers less protection than the fuzzy skin of peaches.

On the plus side, California stone fruit orchards received 1,243 chill hours (when temperatures remain below 45 degrees Fahrenheit), compared with the average of 1,146 chill hours required to achieve full dormancy, an essential stage for the development of strong fruit. As a result, con-

sumers will still find an abundance of good quality California peaches and nectarines this summer, according to the California Tree Fruit Agreement (CTFA)—a grower-funded organization that promotes fresh-market stone fruit.

USDA forecasts total production of peaches in California (both freestone and cling varieties) to decrease 5 percent to 1.77 billion pounds in 2001. Total peach production was 1.87 billion pounds in 2000 and 1.82 billion in 1999. Harvesting of early peach varieties started the week of April 15, early nectarine varieties a week later, and early plum varieties around mid-May.

Figures from CTFA indicate that packout (number of 25-pound boxes harvested) of California stone fruit in 2001 will be down 11 percent from last year. While the fresh-market peach and nectarine harvests are expected down from last year, they will be near the 5-year averages for both crops. Packout of peaches—both yellow and white flesh varieties—is projected to decline 7 percent from last year. (The April hailstorm affected mostly the summer yellow peach varieties.) The nectarine packout is also projected down 7 percent from 2000, while the plum packout is projected down by 18 percent.

Peaches account for more than 70 percent of all stone fruit produced in the U.S. South Carolina and Georgia follow California's 72 percent share of peach production at a far distance, averaging about 6 and 4 percent of the U.S. total over the past 3 years. In 2000, production in the two states was 150 and 115 million pounds, respectively. This year, freezing temperatures throughout the Southeast in early March damaged some peaches in northern Georgia. As of the last week of April, 70 percent of Georgia's peach crop

appeared to be in good condition; 81 percent of South Carolina's peach crop appeared to be in fair to good condition.

Domestic and export prices for stone fruit in 2001 depend on several factors and cannot be predicted with certainty. In 2000, grower prices for plums and nectarines averaged lower than the previous year, while grower prices for peaches averaged 3 percent higher, even with the larger crop. Much of the increase sprang from higher prices for processing peaches, and prices for fresh-market peaches averaged slightly lower. Last summer's retail prices for fresh-market peaches averaged 1 percent below 1999, but 8 percent above the average of the last 5 years (1995-99). Although supplies in California this summer are expected to be ample to meet summer stone fruit demand, reduced production and good quality may push up stone fruit prices from last year.

What could also help boost prices are export markets as strong as last year's, when U.S. exports of fresh peaches (including nectarines) and fresh plums were up 15 percent and 12 percent from the year before. Shipments to all three major U.S. markets for fresh peaches were up (Canada, 1 percent; Taiwan, 29 percent; and Mexico, 42 percent), as were shipments to the two major export markets for U.S. fresh plums (Canada, up 2 percent; and Taiwan, 16 percent). Plum exports to Hong Kong were steady.

Although Japan opened its market last year for the first time to U.S. fresh nectarines, it did so late in the season; domestic supplies were already scarce and only a small volume was shipped. This summer, the Japanese market will open for U.S. nectarines around June 15, according to CTFA, when U.S. supplies are ample. On the downside, poor economic conditions in Japan and slower growth in Taiwan this year may weaken demand for U.S. stone fruit. **AO**

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