

Drought Affects the Texas Hill Country Peach Crop

Adored for its affordable living, rich history, and diverse cultures, Texas is called home by millions. While Texas draws more people in every year, do these pros outweigh the challenges that farmers and ranchers in the Lone Star State continue to face?

Texas agriculture is cursed with devastating droughts that impact the state each year. While workers in the industry have learned and revolutionized techniques to overcome this challenge over the years, it is still their greatest enemy.

Stress on The Hill Country

As of November 7, 2023, data was released by the U.S. Drought Monitor showing Gillespie County is currently ranked at D3, classified as extreme drought. The Texas Hill Country, a hub for the peach and wine industry, is situated in the middle of drought country. Despite this, agriculture still flourishes.

According to the City of Fredericksburg, Texas, on April 1, 2024, the city implemented stage 4 water conservation to help combat the consequences of drought. Stage 4 requires the community to be more conscious of how much water is being utilized, including controlling when yards are watered and guidelines to use drip irrigation.

Not so Peachy

Although agriculture is prosperous in this area, there is much assistance from the farmers to promise success in difficult years, such as 2023. Jamey Vogel, a second-generation peach grower in Fredericksburg, Texas, overcomes this challenge each year.

“The drought definitely limited our crop. The early varieties set pretty well as they had good moisture, but what it does is limit the size of the peaches, so it takes more peaches to fill a box.” Vogel said.

Vogel’s parents, George and Nelda Vogel, planted their first orchard in 1953 as a pick-your-own until they opened the retail store used today in 1972. The peach industry has been a pillar of agriculture in Fredericksburg for decades, with years of practice and expertise gained.

Vogel now owns 105 acres of trees, 65 of which are in full production. With a tough year of drought, the production per acre could decline if the trees are unable to gain new growth, as Jamey said, “This year’s new growth is what fruit is on next year.”

Benefits of a Dryer Climate

Fredericksburg is located in a semi-arid climate, leading to hot summers, warm winters, and minimal precipitation. While little to no rain makes farming difficult, there are some beneficial aspects to a dry summer.

Jamey said, “It actually tends to improve the flavor because they have a higher sugar content. It also limits our issues with mold and fungi, so we don’t have to use as much fungicide as in wet years.”

Jamey mentioned that customers who are aware and understand the dry conditions enjoy the sweeter flavor per peach; however, some customers are disappointed when their iconic large peach expectations are not exceeded.