

CROPS

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"Last year we froze out completely," Sargeant said. "We didn't have anything. And then, when the heat hit, we lost all our vegetables."

Lance Chastain's blueberry and blackberry crops at Chautauqua Hills Farm in Chautauqua were hit hard by the abnormally low temperatures in February 2011. This year, he said, the farm's berries are ready to pick two to three weeks early.

"Blueberries are usually ready for picking by June 10," Chastain said. "This year, they were ripening in mid-May."

Sargeant's crops were ripening early as well. The farm normally doesn't have sweet corn until July 4, but they have already started selling it, he said.

Gaeddert Farms Sweet Corn opened its stands around the Wichita area on Tuesday. The stands usually open up around July 4.

"It's the earliest we've been out," employee Staci Ranfeld said. "It was super hot and dry last year. The weather conditions have been better (this year)."

Tamela and Rick Unruh were at Sargeant's Berry Farm on Thursday picking sand plums to make jelly. Tamela Unruh said her aunt and uncle used to have an orchard, so picking fruit brings back many memories.

"That's the nice thing about the produce being ready earlier," she said. "You beat the heat. The weather is still nice."



Jaime Green/The Wichita Eagle

A group of friends and their children pick blackberries at Sargeant's Berry Farm at 9836 S. Hydraulic. Owner Gaylord Sargeant said his crops came about three weeks early and he plans to plant a second crop of cucumbers and squash.

The earlier harvests will continue this year as long as Kansas stays "within normal seasonal temperatures," McMahon said.

If there's a stretch of hot temperatures this summer, crops won't ripen as early, and quality will be affected more than anything else.

Conversely, a stretch of below-normal temperatures would slow everything down, and farmers would see a "more normal growing window," she said.

"I'd be surprised to see a significant cold spell to slow things down," she said.

Coming up next

Although many fruits and vegetables are ready now, more will be coming soon.

McMahon said pears and apples will be ready next, though they're usually ready

to pick by August. Cucumbers, squash and tomatoes are already in "full swing," as is sweet corn.

Up next for Sargeant's Berry Farm are melons, which Sargeant also expects to ripen earlier than usual. Last year's weather is still affecting the crops, however. Tamela Unruh said she found peaches at Sargeant's and another orchard in Belle Plaine to be a little on the small side.

"Peach trees don't handle stressful conditions as well," McMahon said. The trees will produce, but some trees will be weaker than others.

There will still be peaches available, however.

Beck's Farms grows more than 40 varieties of peaches, and the fruit will ripen and be ready to pick at different times of the year, Beck said.

"We'll be picking peaches right through the summer," Beck said. "Peach picking is wonderful this time of year."

Reach Sarah Tucker at 316-268-6514 or stucker@wichitaeeagle.com.

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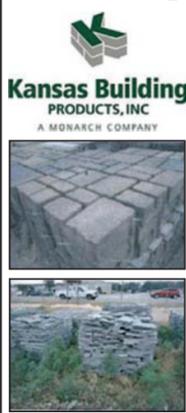
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Blackberry Heaven

Blackberries, raspberries (red, yellow and black), U-pick and already picked, snacks and refreshment stand, picnic area. 1870 SW Santa Fe Lake Road, Towanda, 316-541-2729, blackberryheavenks@gmail.com. Open: Daily, from 8 a.m. to dark during picking season. Payment: Cash or check. www.facebook.com/blackberryheaven

Elderslie Farm

Blackberries, raspberries (spring, black). 3501 E. 101st St. North, Valley Center, 316-519-1545, eldersliefarm@gmail.com. Open: Select Saturdays. Payment: Cash or check. Next You-Pick Extravaganza: Saturday, 7 a.m. to noon. Weekly You-Picks: Monday and Thursday, 7 to 11 a.m. eldersliefarm.com

Entz Orchard

Cherries, apricots, peaches, apples. 8604 S. Webb Road, Newton, 316-799-2515. Open: Monday through Saturday, 8 a.m. until 8 p.m. www.facebook.com/EntzOrchard/

Sargeant's Berry Farm

Blackberries, cherries, peaches, strawberries, tomatoes and pre-picked produce. 9836 S. Hydraulic, Haysville, 316-788-1370. Open: Monday through Saturday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Closed Sunday. Payment: Cash and check. www.facebook.com/pages/Sargeants-Berry-Farm/128781490489307

Steffen Orchard

Peaches, apples. 1345 W. 90th Ave. North, Conway Springs, 620-456-2706, nick@sktc.net. Open: 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. when peaches are ripe.

If you know of other places to pick produce, contact Annie Calovich at acalovich@wichitaeeagle.com.

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