

Local Growers Hope Springtime Hasn't Sprung Too Soon In '90

BY RAHN ADAMS
 Evidence that an "early spring" is bursting out all over Brunswick County is plain to see.
 Though spring doesn't officially begin until late March, flowers already are blooming, fruit trees are blossoming, strawberries are getting ready to bear fruit and local farmers are working from sunup to sundown preparing their fields and groves for what could be a long growing season.
 The fear, however, is that Old Man Winter is lurking around the corner, waiting for a chance to literally nip local crops in the bud.
 "Probably the biggest thing is what the weather will do over the next six weeks," Brunswick County Agricultural Extension Agent Billy Barrow said last Thursday. "We normally get a warm spell in January, but it usually only lasts a couple of weeks."
 After record cold temperatures in late December, the Shallotte area has experienced unseasonably warm weather since mid-January, with average temperatures ranging from six degrees to 10 degrees above the long-term seasonal average, according to weather data supplied by Shallotte Point meteorologist Jackson Canady.
 For the six-week period of Jan. 2 through Feb. 12, the average daily temperature in the Shallotte area was 52 degrees, which was five degrees to six degrees above normal. Temperature extremes ranged from a low of 24 degrees on Jan. 2 to a high of 74 degrees on Feb. 7.
 Canady said Friday that long-range weather forecasts indicate that warmer-than-normal weather will continue through April. However, he cautioned that a "good outbreak of very cold air" with the possibility of frozen precipitation could occur within the next four weeks to six weeks.
 "I would not want to run out and be too hasty and say spring is here just yet," Canady warned. He noted

that our recent warm weather has been caused by a westerly wind pattern in the Northern Hemisphere's jet stream, an upper-level wind current that either brings our region either warm air from the Pacific or cold air from the Arctic.
 "Until that (westerly wind) pattern breaks," he said, "then you won't see any really cold winter weather." He added that conditions in our region also will remain relatively dry, as long as the jet stream doesn't take a more wave-like, north-to-south route across the continent.
 The warm, dry weather over the past few weeks has been a boon to local farmers, according to Barrow. "It's giving them a chance to get their fields worked on in advance," he said, noting that tobacco growers, in particular, need mild conditions to prepare tobacco beds. Also, the county's wheat crop—whose germination process was delayed by frigid December temperatures—has had time to get re-established.
 Grissetown area farmer Kelly Holden said he spent most of last week in his fields, where he even noticed that bluebirds already were beginning to nest in birdhouses on the farm. "It has given us a lot more time to work the fields and get ready for spring," Holden said, later adding, "If we don't get any cold weather, I'll be selling strawberries in about three weeks."
 But the problem with an early spring is that farmers—like Holden and Hickman's Crossroads area fruit grower Sam Bellamy—must get an equally early start in setting up their irrigation systems to be ready to protect their fruit crops against frost. Bellamy's nectarine, plum and peach trees were already in bloom last week.
 Both Holden and Bellamy indicated that this spring seems to be patterning itself after last spring, when unseasonably warm weather in January and February was followed by scattered frosts in March.

When temperatures dip into the 20s, the farmers "frost-coat" their crops by spraying them with water and insulating the plants with thin coats of ice.
 "Ice never gets colder than 32 degrees; the air does," Holden explained. However, he also noted that last year's extremely early spring resulted in one of his shortest strawberry seasons in recent years, because the March frosts disrupted the berries' growing cycle even without doing major damage to the plants.
 While farmers know how to handle different growing conditions, Barrow pointed out that home owners, in particular, shouldn't be fooled into starting their spring chores early. "The big thing for home owners is not to encourage it to go any faster than it's going now," Barrow said.
 The agricultural agent advised that lawns shouldn't be fertilized any sooner than normal and that trees shouldn't be pruned any earlier than necessary, since fertilizing and pruning stimulate plants and trees to grow.

Local farmers aren't particularly worried about the early spring, even though frigid weather within the next few weeks could spell disaster for some crops. "I'm not really that concerned about it," Holden said.
 "It's just another chance you take farming."
 Bellamy's father, Kendall Bellamy, perhaps stated the situation best: "I don't know that there's such a thing as a perfect spring."

Local 'Winter' Temperatures

Week	Avg. Hi	Avg. Lo	Avg. Temp	Above/Below Normal
1st Week Jan. 1988	36	28	32	14 below norm
	59	39	49	3 above norm
	61	41	51	5 above norm
2nd Week Jan. 1988	52	28	40	6 below norm
	62	45	54	9 above norm
	59	34	46	near norm
3rd Week Jan. 1988	56	41	48	2 above norm
	59	36	48	3 above norm
	67	43	55	10 above norm
4th Week Jan. 1988	57	31	44	2 below norm
	70	40	55	10 above norm
	64	40	52	6 above norm
1st Week Feb. 1988	54	39	46	near norm
	63	45	54	8 above norm
	67	46	56	10 above norm
2nd Week Feb. 1988	57	33	45	2 below norm
	61	32	46	near norm
	68	38	53	6 above norm

SOURCE: LOCAL METEOROLOGIST JACKSON CANADY

LOCAL TEMPERATURE READINGS since 1988 show that the Shallotte area has enjoyed especially balmy weather in January and early February for the past two years. Except for one week in January, average temperatures so far this winter have remained from five degrees to 10 degrees above normal.



FARMER KELLY HOLDEN shows a strawberry plant that was getting ready to bear fruit in his fields near Grissetown last week.



FARMER KENNY BELLAMY inspects blossoms on plum trees at his family's farm near Hickman's Crossroads last week.

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