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AGRICULTURE

Warm weather gives South Florida farmers chills

Hot winter weather is breeding hard times for local farmers, particularly growers of tropical fruit.

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By this time of year, Dan Lyons' mango groves should be filled with cream-colored petals and perfumed with the heavy scent of blossoms.

Not this year.

There is not a bloom in sight, and only a few tennis ball-sized fruits dot Lyons' groves, thanks to unusually warm winter weather.

Despite cold spells in early February, high temperatures during the crucial early winter growing season are imperiling crops such as mango, litchi and longan fruit.

The balmy conditions have also brought tiny virus-transmitting pests that bedevil tomato and bean growers.

"Up until this year, I was always worried about the freezes," said Lyons, who has grown mangoes, litchi, papaya and other tropical fruit near Homestead for more than 30 years. "This is the first time I can remember being worried that it would be too warm."

In another first, Lyons prayed for late-season cold to shock his trees into flowering.

Agents at the University of Florida's Miami-Dade Cooperative Extension Office have been keeping close watch on growing conditions in South Miami-Dade, home to most of the county's 68,000 acres of farmland.

"Normally, the groves are columns of blooms and small fruit," said Carlos Balerdi, the commercial tropical fruit agent for the extension office, located in the Redland. "It makes you want to cry."

It may seem counterintuitive for a farmer to hope for cold weather, and too-cold conditions do bring their own frosty peril. But crops like mangoes and litchis need a burst of chilly air to prod them into producing the flowers that grow into the fruits farmers sell later in the year.

The cold prompts trees to hoard carbohydrates and get ready to produce flowers and fruit, explained Balerdi.

Instead, this year, the trees have been reveling in the persistent warm weather, using up their energy store to produce more leaves -- instead of flowers -- much to the chagrin of farmers.

Most forecasts predicted a fairly cool and wet winter and spring season because of El Niño conditions, which occur when water in the eastern Pacific Ocean becomes unusually warm, in turn propelling strong cold fronts through the Southeast.

But a persistent ridge of high pressure for much of December and January acted as a wall to keep the cold out, said Barry Baxter, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Miami.

"Mother Nature is saying it's springtime," Baxter said. "Even though it's not."

The average temperature last December was just over 74 degrees -- about 4 degrees higher than normal and one of the highest on record, second only to 1931.

"And you had a January, that while wasn't record-breaking, was also very mild," said Baxter.

January temperatures were also just over four degrees higher than normal.

That seemingly small jump can bring a host of trouble for growers.

The balmy temperatures have provided a cozy breeding ground for whiteflies. A flurry of the diminutive pests has spread viruses across tomato and bean fields, said Teresa Olczyk, a vegetable agent at the Miami-Dade extension office.

"We usually don't see them in the winter," she said. "But this year we've had whiteflies since the beginning of November."

The whitefly is notorious for transmitting disease, especially tomato yellow leaf curl virus and bean golden mosaic virus -- both of which can ruin a plant's produce yield.

Farmers can use chemicals to protect their plants, or yank sick plants out of the ground to protect the others.

"You can pull the plants out and burn them, but you're never going to get every whitefly," said Olczyk, who has seen some growers yank out entire fields to cut losses.

A tomato field costs about $10,000 a season to maintain, including plastic sheeting, seeds and labor. Beans can cost a farmer roughly $3,000 per acre a season.

A low-yield season means wholesalers will turn elsewhere to stock produce aisles, said Balerdi.

"There is already competition from Mexico, which has a lot of our same growing seasons," he said.

The brief cold weather that swept through in early and mid-February -- bringing lows in the 40s -- could help prod fruit trees into a late-winter bloom.

But Lyons, a former family physician turned full-time farmer, is reluctant to give an optimistic diagnosis.

"I've learned not to get my hopes up," he said.

And the much-hoped for chilly weather of recent weeks has already had an unpleasant side effect, said his son, Danny Lyons, who works alongside his father.

"Our bananas just got fried from the cold," he said. "We've been getting a hard time lately."

PETER ANDREW BOSCH/MIAMI HERALD STAFF
UNEXPECTED WARMTH: Dan Lyons walks by mango trees at his Homestead farm. Normally, these trees would be bursting with buds, but the warm weather in December and January could hurt crops.