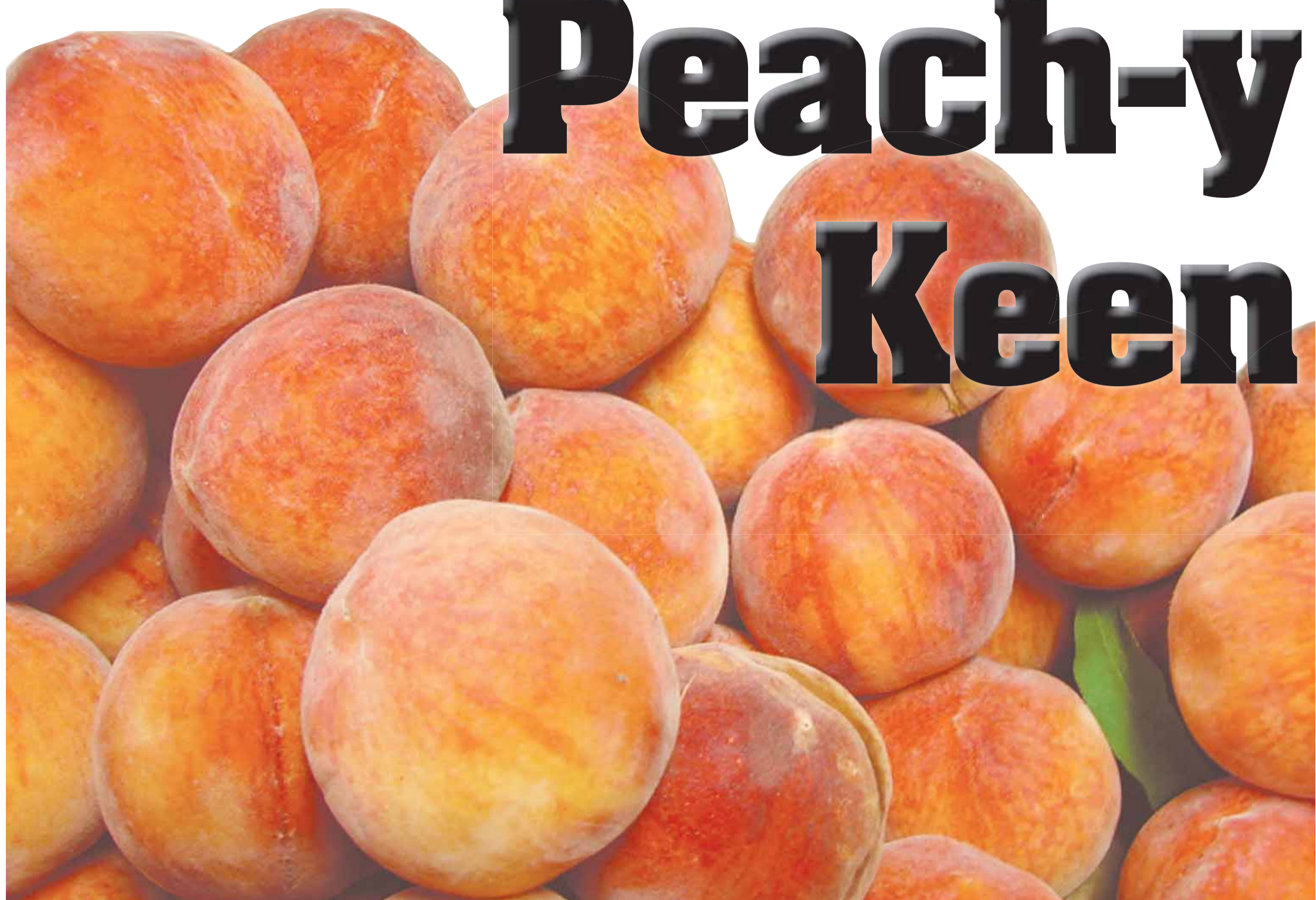


Peach-y Keen



Hood County peach growers downsizing orchards

BY PETE KENDALL
HOOD COUNTY NEWS

Jim Smith likes to tell the story of the farmer who won the \$1 million lottery.

When asked how he was going to spend the money, the man replied, "I'm going to farm till it all runs out."

Smith and Cullen Crisp, Hood County farmers, haven't won the \$1 million lottery, so neither has \$1 million to lose.

So both are beginning to scale back the crop that could run them right into the red in the future ... peaches.

"You can lose the peaches in too many ways," Smith said. "That's why we've gone to truck crops such as tomatoes and beans. If I lose those in a frost, I can replant fast. If you lose peaches, you're out."

Smith lost most of last year's peach crop to brown rot fungus.

"It would have been so expensive for me to save them from brown rot last year that it would have been too costly for anyone to purchase them," he said.

Smith, of Tolar, is down to 200 peach trees, 150 of them currently producing.

Crisp, of Fall Creek Farms near Acton, is down from 1,400 peach trees to between 800 and 900. Between 400 and 600 are producers.

"I lost 225 producing trees last year due to disease and flooding," Crisp said. "I didn't replant all of them. I want to wait and see what happens with the drainage issue."

"I'm also going to look for other areas to plant, and I'm going to see what other trees and plants might be adaptable to this area. I'm getting more into berry production, strawberries and blackberries."

Growing peaches is too much like rolling dice, Crisp acknowledged.

"It's a big gamble. There are a lot of variables. The last four years, we've gone from drought to monsoon to disease and fungus."

So far, so good this year.

"We're on schedule," Crisp said. "We've missed the hailstorms. We've had enough chilling hours.

We've been able to get on a good spray pattern.

"What we're hoping for is a little bit of moisture, enough to keep things wet but not so much that fungus takes over like last year."

Smith's orchard has been plagued in recent years by the plum curculio beetle. The beetle lays eggs in the peach. The eggs hatch as worms.

"Those boogers are hard to deal with," Smith said.

"It think (treatment) is a lot in the timing. The beetle comes out of the ground looking for something to eat, so we watch our plum curculio traps pretty closely.

"This year, I took my eye off the plum curculio and concentrated more on the brown rot fungus, because we had a lot of that last year."

Thus, some of his peaches will contain the plum curculio worm. A man of humor, Smith named his wormier peaches "protein peaches."

"I'll have the original protein peach this year," he said, "and I'll have some pretty peaches, too. The plum curculio is not as bad as it was three years ago."

Crisp has had some trouble with plum curculio.

"We're seeing a little activity on the outer edge of the orchard," Crisp said. "Internally, we haven't seen any."

"We haven't had any brown rot problems so far. We pruned our trees heavily and opened them up. We're on a good mowing schedule, and we put mulch around the bottoms of the trees to keep the weeds

suppressed."

"We haven't noticed any brown rot," Smith added, "but you don't notice it until your peach begins to draw sugar and ripen."

The first peaches are scheduled to come off in late June or early July.

"I'll bet we're seven days behind," Crisp said, "but we have more chilling hours."

The jury is out on Crisp's peaches. Returns are in on his strawberries, a whopping two-acre success.

"We've had no signs of any disease," he said. "This year was better than last year. Next year, we'll strive for a better yield."

He also planted two acres of cantaloupes to go with potatoes, onions, squash and watermelons.

Like Crisp, Smith is branching out.

"We started figs, cherries and pomegranates this year," he said. "We have 25 apple trees that will be producing this year. It won't be a large crop. They'll start coming off in the first part of August."

Smith also specializes in apricots.

"They look pretty good, though we won't have as good a crop as last year," he said. "Maybe that's because of the late frost we had. Also, that large crop last year took some strength out of the trees."

"We're starting to focus more on apricots than peaches. Peaches are tough."



Brown rot fungus in peaches, a common affliction after floods



The plum curculio beetle, devastating to fruit orchards

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FALL CREEK: Cullen Crisp, proprietor of Fall Creek Farms, is cutting back his peach orchard so he can also concentrate on strawberries and blackberries, two of his successful crops.



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OLEO FARM: Jim Smith of Oleo Farm north of Tolar has seen his peach crop once again affected by the plum curculio beetle, which lays eggs in the fruit. The eggs turn to worms.

FACTOID

PEACHES are the leading deciduous fruit crop grown in Texas and it is estimated that there are more than one million trees planted statewide.

LATE spring frost continues to be the single greatest factor limiting orchard profitability and growers should plan on losing one in six to seven crops even in the best of orchard locations.