

Cold Spring, Slow Start for Vegetable Growers in 2010

By: Daniel E. Mullins
IFAS Extension Agent
Commercial Horticulture
Santa Rosa County

An extra cool spring is resulting in a slow start for vegetable producers. Some are waiting for warmer weather, while those who planted earlier are seeing little or no growth of transplants and the slow germination of seeds.

Normally, growers who produce in local fields for the fresh market establish their first planting of warm season vegetables in early to mid-March. This is done to bring in an early harvest for meeting the local demand and to possibly receive a better price than might be obtained from later plantings.

The warm season vegetables such as tomatoes, peppers, squash, melons, snap beans and okra are not responding well to early planting this year. These crops are very sensitive to the low night air temperatures and cold soil being experienced.

Tomatoes and peppers provide good examples of the effects of below normal temperatures. Both are tropical plants that must have plenty of warm weather to properly grow and develop. The threshold temperature for tomatoes is 51 degrees F., and for peppers is 55 degrees F. At average daily temperatures below these thresholds, little or no growth and development occurs no matter how much loving care is provided otherwise.

During the last full week of March in central Santa Rosa County, the average air temperature was 56 degrees F., and the soil temperature was 59 degrees. This has resulted in very few heat units for the development of these and other vegetable plants. Considering that a tomato variety might require 1,200 to 1,500 heat units or degree days above the threshold of 55 degrees F. to mature, it becomes obvious why these plants have grown very little so far.

Vegetable producers are adapting to the unusual weather as they must often do. Some will find it necessary to re-plant, while others will decide that enough cold injured seedlings have survived to nurture until warmer weather.

It's being called the winter that won't end. Though the northern Gulf Coast is warm at this time of year compared to most of the country, we have had a colder than normal winter and cool weather is continuing into spring. Though our last freeze was March 6, nights in the 40s have been the norm in March this year.



This poor bell pepper plant cannot grow due to 40 degree nights.



A tomato plant waits for warmer, better times.

The result of this cool early spring weather will probably be later maturity dates for fresh market tomatoes, peppers, peas, beans, squash, cucumbers, melons and other vegetables. Once the weather turns warm however, heat units add up quickly and vegetable development can catch up quickly. Let's hope.