

Rotating Column

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Heat, Flood, Drought and even Coyote Damage - It's Been a Challenging Growing Season for Area Farmers

Every year brings new challenges for Northwest Florida farmers and so far, this one has been a doozy. There have been extremes in temperature, soil moisture, costs of supplies, and pest damage from insects and diseases and even from deer and coyote.

Most vegetable crops and row crops were planted three to four weeks later than normal due to a cold, wet spring. Severe flooding occurred in late March and early April destroying early planted seeds or seedlings and delaying the planting of other fields.



A flooded vegetable field in mid-March.

Farmers like to get off to an early start and many vegetables are normally planted by mid-March in our area. However, a check of weather records indicates that an exceptionally cold spring occurred. Between mid-March and mid-April there were over 33 hours below 45 degrees F, with one of these cold nights occurring on April 15. As a result, spring air and soil temperatures remained too cold for early planting, corresponding early harvest and better prices at market.

Once the cold, wet spring passed vegetables and row crops were planted and began growing. Then the excessive heat of early summer suddenly began. This



was one of a few occasions that I have observed air temperatures being so high that photosynthesis ceased for a period of time. Beginning on June 18 and continuing for about a week, little or no growth and development of crops occurred. The long term effects of such hot weather on our crops this year remains to be seen.

Dealing with challenges such as plant diseases and insect outbreaks in crops is so common that certain of these pests are expected every year at some level. This was again the case this spring, along with the annual economic loss from

browsing by deer – another serious pest. Crop loss due to feeding by deer has literally been taking a percentage of the crop over the past few years. They have even expanded their diet recently to include cotton plants in addition to peanuts, soybeans and many other crops.

Now, add the coyote to the list of pests that are causing crop losses on area farms. There are several ways that this intelligent, prolific species damages crops, but the best example is to watermelons.

Damage is occurring now in some watermelon fields. Generally coyotes locate the fields, bite open the melons, eat the flesh and leave the rind (see photo). In many cases they only take a few bites, leaving the melon to rot. They often feed in packs or families and quickly learn evasive tactics. It is not unusual for an extra intelligent individual to chew the vine away from a fruit and then roll the melon to a safer, more concealed area for eating.



Along with all of these natural, environmental challenges there is also a shrinking profit margin for agricultural commodities partly due to the increased cost of fuel, fertilizer and other supplies. For example, in 1965 the price for on-farm diesel fuel was 15 cents per gallon. Seed corn was \$12 per bushel at that time, but in March of last year it was \$150 per bushel. In general costs are twelve times what they were in 1965, while the price for the farmers' crops have increased little, if any.

For more information or if you have a question, call Dan Mullins, Extension Commercial Horticulture Agent, The University of Florida/IFAS-Santa Rosa County Extension, at 850-623-3868, between the hours of 8:00 am and 4:30 pm weekdays. Hearing impaired individuals may call Santa Rosa County Emergency Management Service at 983-5373 (TDD).

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