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CENTERPIECE

Summer heat damages local apple crop yields

Emry Dinman Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

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Bill Warren shows a Honeycrisp apple with sunburned patches at Warren Orchards, Sept. 16, 2021.

Greg Lehman, Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

DAYTON — While most newly picked apples from local orchards have a healthy sheen ready for market, crop yields are 20% lower because of the June heat wave.

The damage reveals itself on some Honeycrisp apples at Warren Orchards, for example, with many apples marked with dark, soft patches agriculturally known as sunburn.

“Especially Honeycrisps, they sunburn real easy,” said Warren Orchards operator Bill Warren in an interview. “There’s a tremendous amount of sunburn in the fruit, and it’s ruined the fruit.”

Trees with less leaf coverage, such as the younger trees that had not developed as much foliage, suffered the most. The effect was compounded on trees located near a road, which absorbed more heat that helped bake nearby apples.

In some areas, Warren Orchards had to remove the majority of the crop.

“We waited until after the heat wave, then thinned and cleaned it off as best we could,” Warren said. “Instead of coming in and thinning the fruit which we already do, we cleaned all of the junk fruit off the tree.”

The grower attempted to mitigate the heat damage by spraying a reflective material on the trees, bouncing back some of the sunlight and heat — but many fruit were still lost.

“A lot of them are just done,” Warren said.

Honeycrisps seem to have suffered the most damage from the overbearing sun and successive 110 degree days earlier in the summer, at least at Warren Orchards, a small family operation in Dayton.

Giant producers such as First Fruits in Washington and Earl Brown and Sons in Oregon didn’t respond to a request for an interview.

One representative of First Fruits did state simply that the company’s apples were doing “really well this year,” though follow up questions about yield estimates did not receive a response.

Warren Orchard’s Gala apples suffered from different problems, though still likely connected back to the June heat wave.

The Galas struggled to get large enough to be able to make the company money — if apples aren’t the right size, they get a lower grade, severely reducing the amount of money the grower can expect.

Warren suspects that prolonged high heat stymied the Gala’s growth. While some larger operations can afford overhead cooling systems, Warren Orchards didn’t have that kind of tool at its disposal.

Apples that have defects or aren’t the right size can still be sold to the juice market, but that barely covers the cost of expenses, Warren said.

Warren's Red Delicious apples, prized for their durability in the field and during shipping, suffered from some nominal sunburns, but mostly fared better than their thin-skinned cousins. But while the iconic dark red apple is particularly hardy and long-lasting, consumers have been quickly losing their appetite for the mealy fruit.

If there is a bright side for Warren Orchards, it has nothing to do with apples.

They also produce pears, the only professional operation in the Walla Walla Valley to do so, Warren said. While the apples seemed to suffer in the heat, Warren's pears were relatively resilient, only suffering from minor sunburn and losses in size.

The orchard has been working up to this moment for years, investing time and effort into their pear trees, and despite all the challenges thrown at them in 2021, that investment has paid off.

"This is probably one of the biggest (pear) crops we've ever had," Warren said, looking out at his rows of pear trees. "These trees are loaded."

Emry Dinman can be reached at emrydinman@wwub.com or 425-941-5829.

Emry Dinman

Reporter covering agriculture, Walla Walla city and county government, and other topics.