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**NEWS RELEASE FROM THE OFFICE OF:**

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**FRUIT TREES**

Fruit trees have been beautiful in bloom across East Texas the last few weeks. It looks like we will have a good crop fruit in most areas. The chilling hours requirement for some of the high chilling peach varieties may be marginal or a little short.

The dormant buds of many plants require a period of cold weather to grow, flower, and develop properly, but requirements vary widely by species. For dormant buds of fruit tree, this is commonly referred to as the chilling requirement. Chilling hours re-calculated as a tool for fruit growers to gauge whether their crop has been exposed to cold temperatures for a long enough time period. When the buds have received the proper amount of cold, they respond to warm weather and bloom. If chill requirements is met early in winter, peaches bloom early and may be killed by later frosts. If the amount of chilling by spring is inadequate, buds develop abnormally and bloom sporadically or, in more severe cases, simply dry up and fall off.

The weather station at the Texas AgriLife Research and Extension Center at Overton records this information daily. This provides a good estimate for the Northeast Texas area. Temperatures can fluctuate from one location to another, however, so the number of chilling hours at your peach orchard may be different that what was recorded at Overton. This information is available on the web at <http://overton.tamu.edu>, along with an abundance of other information.

The Overton site utilizes two methods for calculating chilling hours. Method 1: Chilling hours were calculated by counting the number of hours between 32 and 45 degrees F, from October 1<sup>st</sup> through February 28<sup>th</sup>. Method 2: The chilling hours were calculated by counting the number of hours at or below 45 degrees F, from October 1<sup>st</sup> through February 28<sup>th</sup>. The total number of hours for method one for this winter season is 789 hours while method two is 992 hours. The science of the chilling process is not fully understood by fruit researchers and scientist.

The chilling requirement of peaches grown in South Texas is much less than those grown in Northeast Texas. For example some of the low chilling peaches are Flordacrest, 425 chilling hours and Gulfprince, 400 chilling hours. Harvester a very popular peach in Northeast Texas has requirement of 750 chilling hours and Redglobe has a requirement of 850 chilling hours.

We cannot control the amount of cold weather the fruit receives in our orchards, but selecting varieties that are recommended for our area is very important. Additional information on fruit trees, including the latest spray schedule for peaches, is available on the Texas AgriLife Extension Service - Gregg County web site at <http://gregg-tx.tamu.edu/>. Look under the tab publications.

Thinning is one of the most difficult tasks for most home gardeners to face. They often plant radishes, and every seed seems to come up twice. Then, when the radishes don't form normal size roots, they wonder what happened. It is important to thin radishes to one inch apart within a week of germination if you expect to have good size roots, and it is also important to thin developing fruit, like peaches, plums, apples, etc., as soon as possible.

Fruit could probably best be thinned at blooming, but since there's no real practical way to do that yet, at least with stone fruits like peaches and plums, it just about has to be a hand thing. Developing fruit should really be removed when it is less than the size of a dime, and spaced so that the peaches, for example, are 6 to 8 inches apart. If you leave too much fruit on the trees, you may damage them, and you are bound to have smaller fruit. It takes 191 peaches that are 1-3/4 inches in diameter to make a half-bushel, but it takes only 79 peaches are 2-1/2 inches in diameter to make the same half-bushel.

The earlier you can thin the better, so start as soon as you can -- even if the tree hasn't completely finished blooming. If you only have a few trees in the back yard, it's easy enough to remove them by hand -- just give them a little twist, and off they come. Commercial growers go a step further and tie an 18- to 24-inch length of rope or rubber hose on the end of a broom handle, and knock the fruit off with this device. There is usually some natural drop of fruit later on in the year, whether you have thinned or not, but even with this, it is important to do the preliminary hand thinning.

It is also important to begin spraying fruit trees if you haven't already. As soon as three-quarters of the blooms have dropped off, begin to put on cover sprays of an approved insecticide plus an approved fungicide. Regular applications of these pesticides early in the season will guarantee that you will have high quality fruit, free of the fungus brown rot and plum curculio. These unfortunately are common when fruit trees aren't sprayed. As long as you follow label recommendations, you will find that the end product is still very safe to eat.

## Harvest Festival Crawfish Boil

If you have not been able to attend the Annual Harvest Festival Crawfish Boil, you have missed a fun evening filled with some of the best Cajun and Country Western music, all the crawfish, catfish and "fixin's" you can stand! The 14th Annual Cajun Fest Crawfish Boil is sponsored by the Harvest Festival and Livestock Show Committee and will be held at the Maude Cobb Activity Center in Longview on Saturday, April 18, 2009. Tickets are still available for the first seating.

The first seating is from 3:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. Cost of the tickets for the first seating is still \$25.00 per person. All proceeds benefit the youth participants in the Harvest Festival and Livestock Show. Don't miss the best crawfish and music in East Texas. Tickets are available from the Texas AgriLife Extension Service - Gregg County (903/236-8429) or from any Harvest Festival Board member.

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