UK COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE
UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY — COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE

Peaches

Marketing

Commercial peach production in Kentucky is profitable only in western counties, in southern counties and in areas along the Ohio River. Most areas in central and eastern portions of the state traditionally produce a crop only every 4 to 5 years due to winter injury and to late spring frost losses.

Growers need to determine their market in advance of planting. At this time, Kentucky peaches are grown for the following fresh market outlets: farmers' markets, roadside markets, local retail outlets, U-Pick orchards and shipping to terminal markets. Most marketing is currently being done through orchards. Produce auctions have reported a strong wholesale market for local peaches. Producers can also investigate wholesaling to restaurants. Peaches are popular in value-added products, such as ice cream, baked goods and preserves.

Market Outlook

Kentucky consumes more peaches than it produces, thus providing opportunities for additional peach production within the state. The continued demand for high quality, locally produced commercial peaches offers promise for producers willing to invest the time and capital into further developing Kentucky's peach market.

Production Considerations

Site selection and planting

Selection of the orchard site is probably the most important single factor in peach production. The site should be considerably higher than surrounding areas, with good slopes and lower areas for air drainage. Avoid protected areas, such as near wood lots, since these obstruct air flow and allow frost pockets to form. Peaches do well on a wide variety of soil types; however, they will not tolerate heavy, poorly drained soils.

Commercial quantities of peach planting stock need to be ordered 4 to 24 months in advance of planting, specifying the desired delivery date. Peaches are best planted in the early spring. Equipment size and ultimate desired tree size are factors to consider in tree spacing.

Annual pruning should be done in late spring, preferably during or after bloom, depending on the number of trees that have to be pruned. Pruning is used to develop and maintain tree size and shape. Pruning also opens the canopy for more effective pesticide coverage. Because trees set more fruit than can be matured to a desirable size, peaches are thinned. Thinning is done by striking the tree with a padded pole (or a variation of this method) and by hand.

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Pest management

Peach tree short life and cold injury can cause serious losses in Kentucky. Following sound management practices is essential to minimizing these problems. Brown rot, bacterial spot, peach leaf curl, peach scab, and perennial canker can also cause losses. Insect pests include oriental fruit moth, plum curculio, and borers. A regular preventative spray schedule must be followed to control insect and disease problems and to ensure high quality fruit. Mice and other rodents can also damage peach trees. Peach growers use cultivation, herbicides and cover crops in their orchard management program.

Harvest and storage

Each tree is picked from three to five times over the course of the harvest period. The fruit needs to be cooled as soon after harvest as possible. When peaches are to be stored or shipped, hydrocooling in the packing house extends fruit shelf life.

Labor requirements

Peach production requires considerable hand labor for pruning, thinning, and harvesting fruit. Labor needs are approximately 40 hours per acre during the year of land preparation (year 0) and 32 hours per acre during planting and establishment (year 1). General production in years 2 and 3 will require 14 hours per acre, plus an additional 1 hour of pruning per tree. During the fruit bearing years (year 3+) labor needs for production and harvest total 100 hours per acre, plus 1½ hours per tree for pruning.

Economic Considerations

There is a significant start up cost, demanding management and a time lapse of at least 3 years after planting before the first harvest is realized. Full production generally will not occur until the sixth to seventh year. While the initial investment may be large, well-tended trees should last 12 to a maximum of 17 years, depending on the amount of winter injury to the wood.

Initial investments include land preparation, purchase of plants, and tree establishment. A good sprayer for insect and disease control is one of the most expensive equipment items needed. Total costs from land preparation to bearing age (years 0 through 2) are estimated at $4,600 per acre. Production and harvest costs for bearing trees (3+ years) are estimated at $1,600 per acre. Expected returns above total costs are in the $600 to $700 per acre range. U-Pick operations have the potential to reduce harvest costs and increase returns above total costs by 30 to 60 percent per acre.

More Information

- Commercial Tree Fruit Spray Guide (University of Kentucky, *et al*, 2006) http://www.hort.purdue.edu/fruitveg/ID168_2006.pdf
- Growing Peaches in Kentucky (University of Kentucky, 1981) http://www.ca.uky.edu/agc/pubs/ho/ho57/ho57.pdf
- Peach Marketing Fact Sheet (University of Kentucky, 2004) http://www.uky.edu/Ag/HortBiz/pubs/peaches.pdf
- Growing Peaches in North Carolina, AG-30 (North Carolina State University) http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/hort/hil/ag30.html
- Midwest Tree Fruit Pest Management Handbook, ID-93 (University of Kentucky and University of Wisconsin) http://www.ca.uky.edu/agc/pubs/id/id93/id93.htm
- Organic and Low-Spray Peach Production (ATTRA, 2003) http://www.attra.org/attra-pub/peach.html
- Peach Production Budget (Ohio State University, 2000) http://aede.osu.edu/Programs/FarmManagement/Budgets/Fruit/index.htm