

Season's crop is JUST PEACHY

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SOUTH HAVEN

Though Labor Day has come and gone, there are still a few fresh peach varieties available, thanks in part to the efforts of a South Haven researcher who kicked off a whole line of new peach varieties more than half a century ago.

Red Haven, the classic peach variety developed nearly 70 years ago right here in South Haven, remains the world's most popular peach.

Introduced to consumers in 1940 by Michigan State University plant scientist Stanley Johnston, the Red Haven is planted more than any other peach, said William Shane, district fruit educator at the Southwest Michigan Research and Extension Center in Benton Harbor.

Johnston's "Haven" peaches were the first of many new varieties to stretch Michigan's fresh peach season from a few weeks to nearly two months. But that season is still short enough to be precious while it lasts. And it's almost over.

"We are picking five varieties at once, because peaches wait for nobody," said Bill Schultz, of Schultz Fruit Ridge Farm in Mattawan. "I have a real good crop of very good-quality peaches."

He's not alone. Here in southwestern Michigan, where two-thirds of the state's peaches are grown, cool, dry weather has concentrated the fruits' sugars and sunny days and cooler nights bring on the characteristic rosy blush.

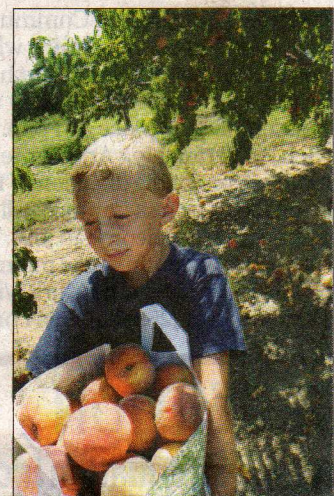
The result: sweet, colorful peaches, "a vintage crop," Shane said.

The only downside: There are not as many of them.

Yields are at about 60 percent of average, due to cold spring temperatures, late freezes and other weather difficulties.

Fresh peaches will be available at markets and fruit stands throughout southwestern Michigan into September. All varieties on sale now are suitable for canning.

Whatever the fruit, wherever the farm, it is wise to call ahead this year before making the trek to pick or purchase, Schultz said.



Cody Vandegeissen carries a half-bushel of peaches back to his grandmother's car at William Schultz's Fruitridge Farms in Mattawan.

Victoria Vandegeissen, 3, above, tries to reach a peach while picking peaches with her grandmother Shirley Vandegeissen and brother Cody, 8, left, at William Schultz's Fruitridge Farms in Mattawan.



At right, Bill Schultz, son of William Schultz, shows peaches to Cheryl Anderson, of Mattawan, left, in the market.