

Unseasonably cold weather may have some Florida blueberry growers frustrated, but frost will not prevent the U.S. state from having a peak production year. 

Florida Blueberry Growers Association president Bill Braswell explained to [www.freshfruitportal.com](http://www.freshfruitportal.com) that despite a serious cold snap right before harvest time, Florida is in for a strong year.

"For total output, we're probably going to have a record year but that's going to be because we have so many more acres on the ground. We had enough chill to set a decent crop. We're going to have a good season," he said.

"I just thought it was going to be much earlier. I thought we would be picking by the end of February and then two weeks ago we got hit with some record cold temperatures and then that really slowed things down. It warmed up and now we're in another cold spell and it looks like it's going to be with us for a week."

Even with weather ups and downs, Braswell said Florida can expect 25 million pounds of blueberry output this year and a US\$100 million season.

Although a smaller state in terms of output, Florida gets the ball rolling for the U.S. blueberry season. The state enters the domestic market first, tucked between monster production from Chile and relatively larger output from Georgia.

Florida, however, continues to grow in terms of acreage and fruit quantity.

Much of the upward blueberry trend can be attributed to the misfortune of the citrus industry, Braswell explained.

"Part of it is that citrus is big here in Florida and between greening, canker and all the other issues that the citrus industry is having, these guys who are big land owners are looking at an alternative for citrus as a crop," he said.

"[Citrus growers] maybe had to push a grove up because of greening and they've got this empty land. If they're going to replant it as citrus, it's going to be five years before they make a nickel. If they replant it with blueberries, they're going to make something next year."

One company that has increased blueberry acreage - in large part due to increased consumer demand - has been Wish Farms. Company vice president JC Clinard explained that although frost has hurt many growers, the central Florida producer has managed to

avoid major damage.

"Our farm in general is going to increase in volume this year. The first reason is because growers that had freeze damage last year don't appear to have had freeze damage this year. There's a lot less freeze damage in our Florida growers this year over last year, so we expect there to be a slight increase overall for us. Another thing is that we've added some growers this year to our program, which will also increase our volume and market share in Florida," Clinard said.

"It looks like we will do just less than 2 million pounds this year. We'll be up about 30%."

The grower expected to enter harvest about a week to 10 days early, in mid- to late March. The traditional Florida harvest comes in early April but new varieties and weather variability have strung out the season.

Hinton Farms sales coordinator Cammy Hinton said the company's growers in central Florida had avoided cold weather damage as well and anticipated a strong year. The distribution company also expected harvest time to come in late March.

### **Too many cooks in the kitchen**

Beyond weather, Braswell said his major preoccupation comes from the number of new players entering the industry.

"People are putting acreage in all over the place. It's not growing quite as fast as it was but it used to be that a farmer would put in two to three acres of blueberries. Now people are putting in 30 or 40 acres of blueberries. There are more people doing it for a living, as opposed to a hobby farmer," he said.

Although interest in the fruit means greater production, Braswell explained that it also means more confusion.

"My only real concern about this season is that we have so many different companies marketing the same product. We have a lot of companies that don't have adequate cooler space. They don't have any experience with blueberries and that concerns me. With any highly perishable crop, you don't want some guy to hit the panic button and start giving the fruit away," he said.

For 25 million pounds of fruit, he estimated that 26 companies have become involved in marketing. Three major companies account for about half of the share, leaving around 12

million pounds to be fought over by 23 different businesses.

With too many companies knocking on the door, Braswell expressed concern that the fight for retailer shelf space could have a downward price effect on an already expensive to produce commodity.

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