

Blueberry production in the U.S. state of Florida is expected to be at least as high as last year this coming season, despite Hurricane Irma damaging numerous farms last September.



Florida Blueberry Growers Association president Brittany Lee said the harvests had recently gotten underway in the southern production areas.

Those in the central and northern regions should start over the next few weeks, she said.

"I would say that as a state we would probably be picking in early April and we expect it to be a soil production year," she told *Fresh Fruit Portal*.

"Last year we had 20 million pounds approximately and I would expect that this year will be as good as last year if not better."

She explained the Florida blueberry industry was trending earlier every year due to increasing acreage being planted in the southern growing areas.

In September last year the state's agricultural industry took a beating when Hurricane Irma hit, flooding some farms and blowing leaves off plants.

But Lee said that while there were undoubtedly some individual growers who had been severely affected, the overall effect on the industry was not large-scale.

Florida has this week received some cold weather, particularly in the central and northern regions, but Lee said it should not impact on production.

"Temperatures [on Tuesday] morning in north Florida were below 30°F, which is below our critical temperature, but generally speaking the blueberry farms in the area are more than equipped to deal with those temperatures. I don't expect there to be any production loss due to that," she said.

On the market outlook, Lee expected a good year in general, noting California and Georgia had both seen some challenging weather during their growing seasons.

California Blueberry Commission executive director Alexander Ott recently said that the end of February and beginning of March had been **“very challenging”** for growers, adding there would definitely be freeze damage.

While Lee was optimistic about prospects for Florida this season, she said it was unlikely to be plain sailing.

"It's always my hope that prices will be better than the year before but it seems like the increasing production pressures on both ends of the Florida crop will continue to create challenging marketing conditions for the Florida blueberry growers," she said.

Chile recently noted **record blueberry exports** for its now-ending season - during which time around two-thirds of volumes were shipped to the North American market - but Lee said that Chilean supplies tended to wind down as Florida's season was picking up and so there should be no problem.

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