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South Carolina growers expecting best harvest in years

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The crop season for South Carolina this year could be easily labeled “The Year of the Bounce.” Growers are ready to have a strong season after the last few years of drastic weather, including untimely freezes and hurricanes, according to Katie Pfeiffer of the South Carolina Department of



Agriculture.

“The outlook right now is pretty good,” Pfeiffer said. “I am hearing really good things from growers all

across the state about the spring and summer crop. I think growers are ready for the bounce.”

This is good news all the way around, she added, as the main industry in the state is agribusiness, which brings in \$42 billion annually.

The memories of hurricanes Michael and Florence and the tolls they took on the state’s winter crop are being replaced with visions of pink peach blossoms; green-variegated leafy lettuces and watermelons with juicy, ripening proportions, state agriculture leaders said.

“The past few months South Carolina has experienced very seasonal weather that has allowed many spring crops like strawberries and asparagus to have good seasons,” said LauraKate Anderson, director of the South Carolina Specialty Crop Growers Association. “Blueberries are on track to have a great season this summer. Overall everything is looking pretty good right now.”

Conditions are adding up to be very healthy for other crops as well, she added.

“Spring crops like collards, kale and other brassicas are growing fast and currently being harvested. Insect populations have been relatively low. Summer crops like tomatoes and peppers have been planted and are growing fast as well. Other summer crops like squash and zucchini are still being planted.”

The squash and summer crops should bode especially well, said Weatherly Thomas, president of the association. “We are feeling blessed by the good weather we’ve been having across the state this past month or so,” she said. “Weather permitting, watermelons, tomatoes, squash and cucumbers look to be great this year. So far, so good.”

With expectations high for the spring and summer, more attention can be devoted to planning, sharing ideas among growers and working to achieve more diversity on the state’s acreage, whether it be in innovations such as indoor aeroponic farming in pods; hydroponic tomatoes and herbs, which are grown in nutrient-rich solution in a controlled environment instead of soil, or exploring new varieties.

“We are always looking to find new markets for growers, meet new buyers and connect growers with new customers,” Pfeiffer said.

New ground for South Carolina growers has included citrus, basil and expanding acreage volume with lettuces and cucumbers and also delving again into cabbages, she said. There is strong crop potential for broccoli in South Carolina, as well as a continuation of growing asparagus.

“Each year, we continue to see more diversity in product mix, increased agribusiness opportunities in processing and distribution, and cutting-edge production and post-harvest handling technology,” said Pfeiffer.

At Dixie Belle Orchards in Ridge Springs, SC, for example, the family farm is ready to try out its new peach sorting machinery, which automatically grades peaches. This helps in quality and in labor costs, farm co-owner Matt Forrest said.

“There are some exciting opportunities on the horizon for South Carolina growers, including advancements in controlled environmental agriculture and increased production of new varieties and products,” Pfeiffer said. “Thanks to the work of our Clemson (Agricultural) Extension (Service) and

other regional researchers, growers are experimenting with products.”

South Carolina growers are also reaching out to neighbors, Pfeiffer added.

“There is ample opportunity for our region, from Florida to Virginia, to unite and marshal our resources. Our central location in the heart of the Southeast puts us at a great advantage,” she said. “It is up to us to connect the dots.”

Look for the Label

The South Carolina Department of Agriculture provides support to buyers through the Certified South Carolina branding and merchandising program.

“We are able to offer farm tours, sourcing and supply assistance, and merchandising signage for stores. We are here as a resource for buyers and for growers,” Pfeiffer said.

Look for these top five South Carolina crops (alongside acres planted last year) to be at their prime this year:

- Watermelon — 4,500 acres.
- Tomatoes — 3,300 acres.
- Peaches — 18,000 acres.
- Cucumbers — 500 acres.
- Collards/leafy greens — 1,000 acres.

“We are very proud of our producers and our products in South Carolina,” said Pfeiffer. “The dedication of our growers and the contributions from combined research and innovation in the lab and the field mean longer seasons, higher yields, more flavorful products and new varieties.”

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