

Solid Apple Crop Expected in Northern New England

LISA RATHKE, Associated Press



In this Tuesday, Aug. 26, 2014 photo, apples begin to ripen at Carter Hill Orchard in Concord, N.H. Northern New England apple growers are expecting a decent crop but not as good as last year's bumper yield. (AP Photo/Jim Cole)

MONTPELIER, Vt. (AP) — A cold winter and trees still weary from last season's massive apple crop have Northern New England growers eyeing a decent but not spectacular harvest this year.

Early season varieties — like Paula Red — are already ripening, prompting pick-your-own orchards to open this weekend or next week.

Vermont, the second biggest producer of apples in New England after Massachusetts, produced about 850,000 bushels of apples last year, and experts predict this year's yield will be close to that. But some orchards are reporting a smaller crop of some varieties that produced bountiful numbers last year.

"This year's crop is a little bit down, and it's totally variable across the state, and it's variable within orchards even," said Terence Bradshaw, tree fruit and viticulture specialist at the University of Vermont. "It's really two factors. One is that the trees put out so much energy producing last year's just incredible crop. The other thing is, yeah, we did have a cold winter."

Genny Boyer, of Boyer's Orchard in Monkton, estimates they're down about a third in McIntosh apples from last year. But all the other varieties — Empire, Cortland, Northern Spy — are doing well, she said.

"The McIntosh just overproduced last year. It just went to town last year, and in

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fact, we gave to every food shelf we could," she said. "It was just a whopper this last year, just a whopper, and most of the orchards around this area had the same problem."

Nationally, the harvest is predicted to hit more than 259 million bushels, an 8 percent increase over last season and the third-largest haul, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The U.S. Apple Association predicts it could be even higher — almost 264 million bushels. Washington state, the nation's largest grower, looks like it will have a strong season, too, with 162 million bushels harvested.

Dick Fabrizio, owner of Windy Ridge Orchard in North Haverhill, New Hampshire, said the harsh winter is to blame for his crop being down about 30 percent. But, he said, the size and quality of the apples are excellent.

"We had a really cold spell in November, and I don't think the trees hardened up in time," Fabrizio said. "Having 70 mornings below zero doesn't help matters."

"You normally have a heavy year and a light year, and we were due for a light year this year," he said.

New Hampshire growers harvested 607,000 bushels in 2013 and are expected to pull down just 381,000 bushels this season, according to the USDA.

At Concord's Carter Hill Orchard, owner Todd Larocque said they're seeing a few light spots in this year's crop, but there are still plenty of apples to pick and to feed into their cider-making operation. Larocque also co-chairs the New Hampshire Growers Cooperative and has been in touch with growers around the state.

"Everyone's got somewhat of a halfway decent crop," Larocque said.

Jeff Timberlake, a co-owner of Ricker Hill Farm in Turner, Maine, said a rainy summer without the perils of hail from thunderstorms has his crop looking "pretty darn nice.

"With all the rain, the sizing has come along really nice," he said.

Adams Apple Orchard & Farm Market in Williston, Vermont, got socked with cold weather in November before the trees went dormant.

"Our crop is down about a third," Scott Adams said. The orchard lost most of its Empire and Paula Red apples but has enough McIntosh, Cortland and other kinds to fill out the season.

Now that the fruit is ripening, growers are keeping their fingers crossed that the weather will hold — without any damaging hail or windstorms — through the fall season, said Steve Justis, executive director of the Vermont Tree Fruit Growers Association.

**Associated Press writers Lynne Tuohy in Concord, New Hampshire, and David Sharp in Portland, Maine, contributed to this report.*

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