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Hello Fruit Growers!

Summer is taking its sweet time in arriving this year. We saw our first bumblebee land on a recently purchased rhododendron with open flowers sitting on our deck on May 14. There was little else for them to feed on until the early haskaps began flowering on May 17. The cool weather delayed the Nanking cherry. It only started to open on May 20 and didn't reach full bloom until May 27. The Nanking was abuzz with honeybees on the day or two that were warm and calm enough for them to be foraging.

Instead of the usual explosion of plant material in May, plant phenology is advancing at a crawl. Due to the cold and overcast weather pattern over Southcentral Alaska, the [growing degree day](#) (GDD) totals for our orchard this year are fairly meager. The total for April and May this year was only 318 GDD/42°. In comparison, the total for 2022 was 500 GDD/42° and for 2021 the total was 450 GDD/42°. Ground temperature on our SW facing sloped orchard reached 45° F at 6" on May 12, and 50° on May 19.

I heard from members Sarah and Steve Masterman in Fairbanks and it sounds like they are at about the same point of plant development as we are in Southcentral. Their cherries are at the "White bud" or "popcorn" [stage of development](#) with apples also opening soon. Haskaps, pears and plums are in bloom. (See photo above of Dave's Yellow Plum in Masterman's Orchard on May 28, 2023 courtesy Steve Masterman)

In Southcentral, bloom will be relatively late this year. Apples are at the "pink" [stage of development](#) with king blossoms just starting to open. The king blossom is the center flower of the cluster of usually 4-6 flowers. It will open first and is considered to be the prime flower for fruit. It is often the largest fruitlet of the cluster, and is the one that is kept when thinning the developing apples. (Photo below of king blossom on Sweet 16)



Cherry flower buds are looking good and are at the popcorn stage in Anchorage. However, the following apple cultivars in our orchard appear to have poor return bloom this spring: Carroll, State Fair, Prairie Magic, Prairie Sensation, Simonet, Altaiski Sweet, Ft. Mac/Mac, Whitney and Zestar. Of those, Carroll and Whitney were also late to leaf out. Only Golden Uralian and Lee 27 appear to have their normal amount of flower buds.

I wonder if this is due to the constant cloud cover and wetness that we experienced last year starting in mid-July. Saturated soils can become anerobic which could have impeded nutrient uptake during the period of floral initiation. In Alaska that period begins around the end of July and into August. I will be interested in hearing if members (you!) are experiencing reduced bloom this year and what cultivars are affected. [Email me](#) if you notice reduced bloom or if your trees were late/slow to leaf out.

Since our apple trees are on seedling rootstock (Renetka and Baccata) it may be that a couple of them won the genetic lottery and were able to handle the wet weather, while others did not. Or possibly, that their location in the orchard just happened to be in soil with better drainage. Anchorage soils tend to be heavy with clay which is not ideal in a record-setting wet season like 2022.

If you need to fertilize your fruit trees, petal fall (after bloom) is the time to do so. The tree's root systems become active around bloom and we want the Nitrogen utilized by the end of summer so the tree is not actively growing when trying to go dormant.

Before you fertilize, check the amount of growth that occurred last year. On trees up to eight years of age, look at the tip of the branch down to the previous year's growth ring. If you had 12" or more of new growth, you are probably fine. No need to fertilize unless you enjoy pruning. If your tree needs a little boost, the easiest approach is to thinly spread some composted steer manure under the tree out to 3 feet past the drip line. Remember that roots can extend well past the drip line on seedling rootstocks.

Haskaps (honeyberries) have or will shortly finish bloom. That is a good time to spray B.t. ([Bacillus thuringiensis](#)) to rid the plants of leaf rollers. As the name implies, these little caterpillars nibble on the young leaves and emerging fruit and hide by rolling a leaf around themselves at the end of a shoot. They can scar and damage the emerging fruit if not caught early. While you have the spray out, spray any saskatoons and any other fruit trees/bushes showing signs of infestation.

I was concerned that the large amount of snow burying the smaller berry plants like blueberries, currants and gooseberries might have caused damage. I had to provide a little support to help a Chippewa blueberry to regain its upright composure, but the rest of the berry bushes sprung back with no issues. I saw my first yellow jacket and bald face hornet queens pollinating a black currant on May 28.

We also seem to have a very healthy bumblebee population based on the activity observed on the haskaps, so I expect good pollination of the blueberries when their flowers open. Blueberries are currently at "tight cluster" and "shoot expansion" [growth stage](#). (see photo below of Northblue blueberry) Once the blueberries bloom, it is time to fertilize them with 2 Tablespoons of fish emulsion/gallon of water per 25 square feet. Repeat this application at the beginning of July.



Raspberries are sending up new growth (this year's primo canes). If you choose to fertilize your established raspberries, this would be the time for the first of two monthly installments. Apply 2-3 Oz N (nitrogen) to every 10 feet of row. The N-P-K numbers on the fertilizer indicates the percentage of Nitrogen(N), Phosphorus(P), and Potassium(K) in the product. For example, a balanced 10-10-10 fertilizer has 10% Nitrogen by weight. Thus, 20 oz of 10-10-10 fertilizer would contain 2 oz of N.

One plant in our orchard and garden that wasn't fazed by the wet weather last summer, or the winter, was the watermelon berry ([Streptopus amplexifolius](#)). Leave it to an adapted Alaska native plant to thrive in a cool wet summer and snowy winter. We eat the shoots when they first come up, and unlike in the wild, the plants get to be quite sizable and ornamental in a garden. Our chickens and the robins love the berries, so there is no shortage of seed being spread here and there. If you would like a plant, just [email me](#). I am sure we can find a volunteer or two to give you.

Zoe Fuller at Singing Nettle Farm in Lazy Mountain, Alaska, is part of a team of farmers that is starting a farmer's market in Palmer. They currently have 3 veggie farmers, flowers, meat, salmon, eggs, herbals, coffee, bread etc... but no fruit vendors yet! If you would like to sell fruit, more information can be found at www.matanuskacommunityfarmersmarket.com/vendors or you can reach out to the market manager Brandi Jo at matanuskafarmersmarket@gmail.com.

Now that the season is underway, it is time for our first orchard tour! Please join us on Saturday, June 10, at 2:00 pm for a blossom tour of the [Government Hill Commons](#) orchard in Anchorage. There is a little bit of everything to see, including some espaliered trees. Plus, it will be fun to share and connect. If you are new to the club, please see our [Orchard Tour Guidelines](#).

Hope to see you there!

Mark Wolbers
President, APFGA

