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Alaska Pioneer Fruit Growers Association

Hoarfrost on Tundra Haskap

Hello Fruit Growers!

I often forget how different it is to live in Alaska. A recent visit to Seattle, our nearest lower 48 neighbor, reminded us how dramatically different our climate is. In Seattle, hummingbirds were still at the feeders, figs and bitter persimmons were still on the trees. Of course, snow boots weren’t needed, but a rain jacket was. In the morning, we would wake up to emerging daylight. It was like mid-September here.

Obviously, it makes a difference where one lives on the globe. Our upper latitude comes with an amazing winter full of snow and auroras followed by summers with daylight that never seems to end. Part of the challenge, and one might say fun, is to figure out how to take advantage of the opportunities that are available. My curiosity has led me to want to quantify Growing Degree Days to better understand what can grow here. Luckily, I have begun to convince others to join the effort to document our growing environment.

We have two members who acquired temperature loggers and were able to capture the data for the entire 2024 growing season. One is Doug Damberg, our APFGA Board Secretary who lives in South Anchorage off Golden View Drive overlooking Turnagain Arm at an elevation of 730 feet. The other is Steve and Sarah Masterman who live outside of Fairbanks (Ester) at an elevation of about 750 feet, which is about 300 feet higher than Fairbanks. Below is a comparison of the GDD/42° F of those two locations along with that of our orchard in E. Anchorage at an elevation of 180 feet.

2024 Growing Degree Day Comparison

	E.Anc.	S.Anc.	Fbks
April	92	66	125
May	241	178	365
June	583	468	790
July	574	508	640
Aug.	520	440	470
Sep.	280	237	170
Oct.	50	31	20
Total	2340	1928	2580

For the Anchorage area, the season was essentially over on October 5. This was when the curve for accumulating GDDs flattened out even though the season-ending freeze didn’t arrive until 17 days later. Only 14-20 GDDs accumulated in that remaining time. In Fairbanks, the GDD curve flattened out on September 18, with temperatures rarely getting over 50° after that. Only another 20 GDDs accrued before their season ending freeze on October 2.

The beginning of significant GDD accrual was almost the same with April 17 for Fairbanks, and April 19 for Southcentral. But Southcentral finished with 2.5 additional weeks of growing weather at the end of the season. Despite a longer season, the maritime weather we experienced this past season in Southcentral meant our GDD totals were a couple hundred less than that outside of Fairbanks. This meant that Steve and Sarah were able to ripen September Ruby apples, while ours were not quite ready at the end of the season.

You can also see the impact that elevation and proximity to water plays in altering one’s micro-climate. Doug, who is located up the hillside near Golden View Middle School, had around 400 less GDDs than I did inland in East Anchorage. With this information, Doug is re-assessing what cultivars he should be growing, so in a worse-case scenario, like our past two summers in Southcentral, he will still produce a crop of fruit.

There is a growing number of growers who invested in temperature loggers this summer. Just [email me](#) if you would like recommendations on equipment. The most important thing is to choose equipment that comes with software that can figure or approximate GDDs calculated using the Baskerville-Emin method. This allows direct comparisons with others in our network and with extension services outside. You can also buy temperature loggers to monitor soil temperature. (As of Dec. 1, at 6” depth the soil in our orchard is 35°F.)

In other news, there was a wonderful article in the Anchorage Daily News about Peter’s Creek member Josh Smith and his efforts to grow hazelnuts. The article is titled, [“Alaska-grown hazelnuts? Changing climate helping growers coax unusual crops from northern soil.”](#) Josh has been growing hazelnut seedlings at both his Bear Mountain Forest Nursery and the Matanuska Experiment Farm in Palmer. He is planting seed stock from a northern Saskatchewan strain which are hybrids between American and European hazelnuts and Siberian hazelnut hybrids from Quebec.

December is the month that we kick off our Winter Speaker Series on Zoom. Our first presenter is Steven Edholm on Thursday, December 12 at 7:00 pm. Steven runs a website called [SkillCult](#). The thrust of his conversation with us will be about how you (we) could improve our cold hardy, short season apples through breeding. He will explain the principals of selecting appropriate cultivars to cross and how to carry out the process leading to potentially better cultivars. To join the talk, first make sure you have the current Zoom application downloaded onto your computer or device. Then, on the day of the presentation just click the link at 7:00 pm to [join the presentation](#). Vice President Michael Burke will be moderating the meeting. Click the link if you would like the [full Zoom invite](#).

We had a good membership meeting in November. We successfully met our quorum and the membership voted to retain Val Glooschenko, Gary Masog and myself for another 2 year term. After the short meeting there was some interesting discussion on yellow jackets, apple scab, moose damage and Fred Deiser’s work with plums.

One of the points I brought up at the membership meeting in the President’s report regarded membership engagement. I am encouraging the board to create a survey to assess the interest of members in the various club activities. For the benefit of the membership, your volunteer board has been offering various workshops, tours, tastings and pressing events each year. However, some of these events were not well attended by the membership this past year and getting volunteers to help with events has sometimes been problematic. So, I am recommending that we collect some data on what activities you (the membership) want and your willingness to help make them happen.

The newly elected board met the following week. They voted to retain all of the current officer positions. I will continue as President, Michael Burke as Vice President, Gary Masog as Treasurer, and Doug Damberg as Secretary. The next APFGA Board of Directors meeting will be on Wednesday, December 18 at 7:00 pm on Zoom. Members are welcome. Just click the link to [join the board meeting](#) at the appointed time. Here is the proposed [agenda](#), past meeting [minutes](#), and full [Zoom invite](#).

Finally, just a reminder that it is time to renew your annual membership for 2025. Please go to the [APFGA website](#), go to the “join/donate” page, and follow the instructions for “Annual Membership Renewing.” Annual membership cost is \$16, and lifetime memberships are \$160. Memberships can be completed on-line using a credit card. If you have friends or family in Alaska interested in growing fruit, a membership also makes a great holiday gift!

All the best,

Mark Wolbers
President, APFGA

