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Arkansas Peach Production in 2026: A Challenging Year in a Familiar Cycle

Arkansas peach production is essentially at a standstill in 2026, following a series of early spring freezes that arrived at the worst possible time in the growing cycle. Warm temperatures in early March pushed trees out of dormancy and into bloom ahead of schedule. When temperatures dropped into the low 20s shortly after, the blooms responsible for producing this year's fruit were lost. Without viable blooms there is no opportunity for the trees to set fruit later in the season, effectively eliminating the crop statewide.

The same weather event also impacted other specialty crops, including blueberries. In that case, damage was more variable, and largely depended on the timing of each variety. Earlier fruiting blueberry varieties experienced more significant losses, while later varieties that had not yet developed were able to avoid the worst of the freeze. While blueberry production will not be completely lost, the event still reduced yields in parts of the state and serves as another example of how timing drives outcomes in specialty crop production.

While the scale of the peach loss is significant, the situation is not unusual for Arkansas producers. Peach production in the state is highly dependent on spring weather patterns, and late freezes following early warm periods are a recurring challenge. In practice, growers plan around the expectation that not every year will produce a full crop. Variability is part of the business, and long-term decisions are made with that understanding in mind. A bad year is not an exception; it is part of the production cycle.

To understand the impact of a lost crop, it helps to look at the economics of the industry. According to the 2022 Census of Agriculture, Arkansas reported 376 acres of bearing-age peach trees, down from 525 acres in the previous census (2017). While acreage has declined, the crop continues to carry a high per-acre value. In a typical year, orchards may produce around 200 to 300 bushels per acre, or roughly 10,000 to 15,000 pounds of fruit. Using a midpoint estimate, statewide production can reach approximately 3 to 4.5 million pounds in a good year.

Prices vary depending on marketing channels, with many Arkansas farmers selling directly to consumers through farm stands and local markets. Across those channels, peaches often bring around an average of $2.00/lb. At that level, a typical year's crop across the entire state, not per farm, can generate roughly $6 to $9 million in total farm level revenue, depending on yields and market conditions.

When a full crop loss occurs that revenue is effectively removed for the season. For individual farmers, the financial impact depends on the size of their business, but in many cases it represents the loss of an entire year of income from their orchards. Beyond the farm gate the effects ripple through the broader economy. Peach production supports agritourism, farmers markets, seasonal labor and local retail activity, particularly in rural communities. When those indirect and induced effects are factored in previous estimates, based on 2022 data, it puts the statewide economic impact of Arkansas peaches at near $90 million. Adjusted for inflation, that figure is closer to $102 million today. This means the 2026 crop loss represents a substantial economic hit, not only for producers, but for the communities and businesses tied to the peach season.

The absence of a crop also disrupts the broader economy. Fewer consumers travel to orchards, roadside stands see less traffic and businesses that benefit from seasonal demand experience a slowdown. In smaller communities, where local food and agritourism play a meaningful role, the loss of a peach season can have noticeable economic consequences.

Even so, most Arkansas peach producers are not dependent on a single crop. Diversification is a key strategy for managing risk in an environment where weather can quickly change outcomes. Many operations combine orchards with row crops, cattle or other enterprises that help stabilize income over time. This approach does not eliminate losses in years like 2026, but it does provide a level of stability that allows farms to continue operating.

It is also important to recognize that, while the crop is gone, the orchards are not. Trees still require year-round management including pruning, irrigation, pest control and general upkeep to remain productive for future seasons. Those efforts come with real costs in labor, equipment, and inputs, and in a year like 2026, they must be covered without the revenue a harvest would normally provide. As a result, growers are not only losing a year of income but continuing to invest in their orchards to ensure they remain viable moving forward.

That long term perspective is central to peach production in Arkansas. Orchards are managed with the understanding that strong years and weak years will balance out over time. The 2026 season reflects the type of variability producers anticipate as part of operating in this environment. Farmers will continue managing their orchards, adjusting their operations and preparing for the next opportunity to produce a crop.

From a policy standpoint, seasons like this highlight both the importance and the limitations of existing risk management tools for specialty crops. Compared to major row crops, peaches and other fruit crops often have fewer insurance options, and participation can be limited by cost or program structure. Federal programs such as the Noninsured Crop Disaster Assistance Program and other disaster relief efforts can provide some support following a loss, but they are not always designed to fully replace lost revenue. The need for effective risk management tools is further underscored by longer-term trends within the industry. According to USDA's two most recent Ag Census', Arkansas reported 212 peach farms in 2017, which declined to 183 farms in 2022, reflecting the pressures producers face

from weather risk, input costs, and market uncertainty.

Strengthening risk management tools is important, not only for helping farms remain viable, but also for consumers who benefit from access to locally grown food, stable supply and the economic activity these farms generate within their communities.

For consumers, the absence of Arkansas peaches this season will be noticeable. For farmers and rural communities, it represents another challenging year in a system where uncertainty is expected, but where long term planning and experience continue to guide the industry forward.

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