

# February freeze could cost Ashley's Peaches the farm

38



DEBEE TLUMACKI FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

**At Ashley's Peaches, owners Ernie and Diane Ventura checked on the buds on their peach trees.**

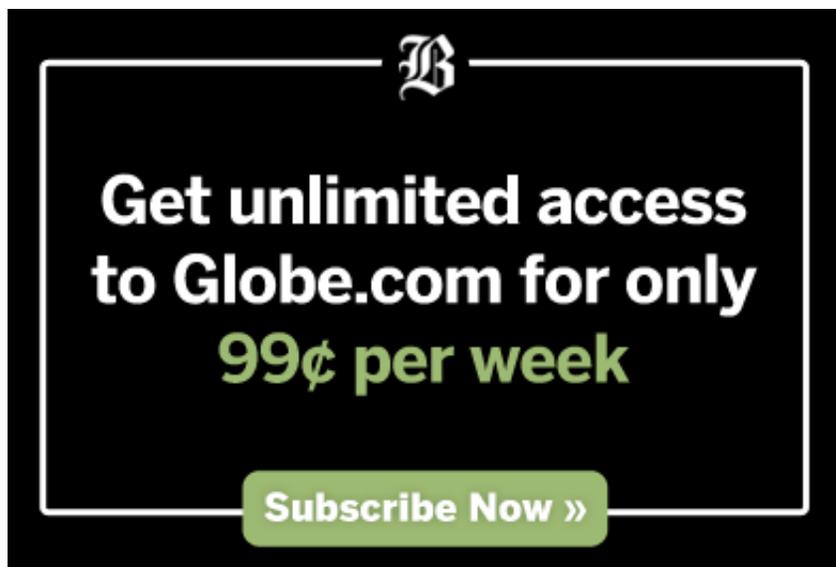
**By Nestor Ramos**

GLOBE STAFF APRIL 14, 2016

ACUSHNET — Summer mornings at Ashley's Peaches usually go like this: Ernest and Diane Ventura head out into their orchard to start picking around 6. Soon after, Diane comes back in and leaves a new message on the answering machine to announce what time the farmstand will open. By 11:30 or so, a few dozen people are waiting out front.

But this summer is going to be pretty quiet outside the leafy old farmhouse on

Main Street.



**B**

Get unlimited access  
to **Globe.com** for only  
**99¢ per week**

**Subscribe Now »**

An unseasonably warm winter brought peach trees all over New England out of dormancy early, leaving them vulnerable to February's cold spell. The frigid temperatures decimated peach orchards across the state and killed nearly every last bud on the small plot where Diane's family, the Ashleys, has farmed for five generations.

Most apple orchards don't appear to have been hit as hard, but with no peaches to sell for the first time in about 75 years, the future of Ashley's Peaches looks a little fuzzy. The bills keep coming. Most of the farmland was sold off years ago and the farmhouse is mortgaged. And Diane isn't sure what she'll say on that answering machine each morning come July, when people would normally be lining up for some "leaners" — peaches so juicy you have to lean over to eat them without ruining your shirt.

In the end, the freeze that cost many New England farms their peach crop may cost the Ventura's their livelihood.

"We want to continue to farm. We love it. We feel healthy enough to do it," said Diane, whose great-great-great grandfather lived in the same house and worked

the same land.

Three years ago, she had open heart surgery and went right back to slinging peach baskets a few weeks later. The thought of packing up and moving to a 55-and-over development is almost too much to take — especially, she said, because it wouldn't be for lack of customers: “The community loves what we do.”

The evidence for that claim is ample: There was the time a 93-year-old customer told Ernest he had to live one more year so he could squeeze in another season of peaches; the morning when two women almost had it out right there by the side of Main Street over who was next in line — a near-brawl that led Diane to institute a take-a-number system; or the nightmare weekend after a well-meaning cable news feature led to a flood of increasingly agitated peach-seekers, demanding to know why the day's peaches had run out hours earlier.

For those who've had an Ashley's Peach, few things compare.

JC Tetreault, cofounder of Boston's wildly popular Trillium Brewing Company, grew up near Ashley's. In 2011, when the brewery was in its infancy, he added some of the peaches to a beer he was aging and wrote an ode to Ashley's:

“Ashley's are full on real peaches, as they were intended and should be. Ripened on perfectly pruned trees that have been thinned to enhance sun exposure, ripening and full flavor,” he wrote. “When you can get them, these are by far the best peaches I've eaten in my life.”

Now, that fanatical level of support — earned, Ernest believes, by the couple's commitment to picking only perfectly ripe peaches and selling them the same day — may be what keeps them afloat. In about 24 hours, with virtually no publicity, an online fund-raiser set up by the couple's son raised over \$3,000 to

help the couple weather their lost profits this year.

The Venturas, both 67, met in middle school and have worked the farm together since they were teenagers, taking over full time in 1988. And while the Venturas find it more than a little embarrassing to ask for handouts, it's not as if they can run out and get another job. Though the trees won't bear fruit in 2016, they still need tending to keep them healthy for next year: Six solid weeks of pruning (Ernest trims, Diane schleps away the brush), running the old tractor over the 5-acre farm to slice up weeds, and all the other things that keep the soil healthy in what Diane called a "ghost orchard."

But even the most careful tending can't prepare a northeastern peach crop for what happened this winter. Ernest said the warm winter meant the trees weren't fully dormant when the cold arrived around Valentine's Day. And while the little orchard is usually just high enough above sea level and close enough to Buzzards Bay to avoid a spring frost, nothing could protect it from the February freeze.

"When your pipes froze, his peaches froze," said Ed Davidian, president of the Massachusetts Farm Bureau, whose Davidian Brothers farm in Northborough also lost a good portion of his 15-acre peach crop this year.

Davidian said the frigid February temperatures likely cost Massachusetts significant portions of its peach crop. And while an exact number of peach growers in the state was hard to come by, Davidian said it's more than people



DEBEE TLUMACKI FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

**A damaged bud will just fall off after the spring freeze.**

might guess, perhaps as many as 300 or 400. Other northeastern states were affected as well, he said.

Peaches are typically a small part of a diverse array of crops, Davidian said. While the loss of a season's worth of peaches would mean a substantial amount of money for some farms, it wouldn't typically be enough to shutter a business.

But Ashley's Peaches sells mostly peaches — hence the name — and a season with nothing to sell would be devastating.

“It would be like losing your job tomorrow,” said Ernest, though even that isn't quite right. It would be like losing your paycheck, but still having to go to work every day.

If they can somehow float through this summer in the ghost orchard, buoyed by some combination of generosity and good fortune, Ernest is convinced that next summer's crop would be special.

A year of rest will do the trees good, he said. It'll also be the couple's 50th wedding anniversary.

“Big crop next year,” Ernest said, and turned to Diane, smiling at her through his thick mustache and goatee. “I'll take you somewhere.”

But they both know this is where they want to be.

*Nestor Ramos can be reached at [nestor.ramos@globe.com](mailto:nestor.ramos@globe.com). Follow him on Twitter [@NestorARamos](https://twitter.com/NestorARamos).*