

Delaware County farmers aren't too concerned about lack of rain

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(Photo: Jordan Kartholl / Star Press)

MUNCIE, Ind. — Muncie yards might look a little crispy for early June, but farmers aren't too worried — yet.

Dry spells can be good for crops, but corn and soybean farmer Joe Russell said too much dry weather can cause stress on crops, which can affect the crop's yield.

"It [dryness] was a good thing early because it allowed us to get everything planted, but lately its becoming very concerning because once the crops are planted they need about an inch of rain a week for optimum growth," said Russell, who is a Delaware County Farm Bureau member.

On average, Muncie receives about 4.4 inches of rain in May. However, National Weather Service meteorologist Jason Puma said Muncie received less than an inch in May.

Russell, who planted his crops during the second and third weeks of May, said his crops are "looking good" but the lack of rain is causing stress to some of his crops.

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Right now, he said it's important to get a nice rain within the next week to help alleviate some stress from the corn as it heads into its interim period, which will determine the size of the ear and how many rows of kernels each ear will have.

At this point, Russell said consumers shouldn't worry about the dry weather yet. However, for strawberry lovers, the lack of rain could limit summer berry production.

Landess Farm, 6000 W. County Road 700 S., Daleville, Ind., has been limited with its berry production this summer.

Susan Landess, who helps run the farm with her husband, Jesse, said if it doesn't rain soon, the berry season will end shortly.

"If we get a lot of rain in the next few days, we might be able to pull some berries out of other varieties," she said.

Though the farm has enough berries for its 12th annual Strawberry Festival from noon to 6 p.m. Sunday, services like u-pick berries are closed because there hasn't been enough rain.

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Jesse Landess inspects a row of strawberries at Landess Farms in Daleville. May's record-breaking heat and a lack of rain has significantly limited the farm's strawberry yield. (Photo: Jordan Kartholl / Star Press)

"The positive side to the drought is that the berries are very good," she said. "[There's an] excellent flavor in the berries, even though we don't have as many."

Although the dry weather has contributed to the flavor of some crops like strawberries, it can make others like lettuce and radishes bitter.

Wendy Carpenter, who runs Christopher Farm, 5305 W. 500 S. Modoc, Ind., planted her crops almost two months later than normal because the ground was too wet. Now, she said she's had to destroy her early variety crops, which tend to be less heat tolerant.

"I think I always was kind of thinking, "This [climate change] isn't going to be a big deal for me as a grower. By the time it becomes a really big deal, I'm going to be retired," Carpenter said. "This year has kind of made me realize that's not the case. It's already a big deal and I do have to deal with it."

For Carpenter, the lack of rain isn't destroying her crops — high temperatures early in the season are.

"Normally I can grow head lettuce pretty much until the end of June ... but this year they all have bolted after Memorial weekend and then even since that we've had temps in the upper 80s, lowers 90s," she said. "So, all of my head lettuce is done for pretty much."

While the United States Drought Monitor hasn't declared Delaware County in a drought, Petra Zimmermann, director of the Meteorology and Climatology Laboratory at Ball State, said the county is in an agriculturally dry period.

"We're certainly in a rainfall deficit," she said. "We didn't get enough rain in May and we're not really seeing it right now. The little sprinklings that came through [Tuesday] probably are a tenth-of-an-inch or less and we need much more than that."

Zimmermann said it's not unusual to see variation, but dry weather typically happens in July and August, not in May.

David Call, associate professor of meteorology and geography at Ball State, said it's a short-term deficit that could be fixed with a little steady rain.

Because it has been so hot, he said, the deficit is more noticeable because of plants that can't hold moisture.

Short-term forecasts predict dry weather will last, Call said, but long-term forecasts suggest a wet summer, with more rain in the later summer months.

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