Tiny pest steals the show at fruit festival

Fruit-injuring fly has made its mark on blueberry crop

BY WHITNEY PIPKIN
Staff writer

A fruit-piercing fly feared for its impact on small fruit crops seems to be doing its worst on Skagit County’s late-season berries.

That’s at least true for the blueberries growing at the Washington State University Mount Vernon Research and Extension Center, which hosted its summer fruit festival Saturday. A fruit-piercing fly has been detected on farms throughout the county, and the berries have been damaged.

“We almost thought we missed the season, but it did hit late in the season. And the blueberries are highly infested,” said Beverly Gerdeman, an entomologist at the center who’s been studying the flies since they first emerged at the end of last summer.

She gave a presentation at the festival to mostly backyard fruit growers who, she said, are really concerned about the pest.

The pest, known as the spotted wing drosophila, first appeared in the state last August. The female fly inserts her larva into still-growing small fruit, making it mushy instead of ripe for the picking.

So far, the female has shown no preference for one berry or another.

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ABOVE: Fruit festival attendees take a closer look at the leaves of an apple tree Saturday during a tour of the display gardens at the Washington State University Mount Vernon Research and Extension Center. From left are researcher Bob Horton, Linda Schaeffer of Mt. Vernon, Island County and Jason Nieder of Seattle.

LEFT: Sally Petersen, a volunteer with the Western Washington Fruit Research Foundation, offers samples of fresh figs Saturday at the summer fruit festival.
Fruit

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another. She's left her mark on everything from cherries to strawberries, though the cooler weather early this summer kept the flies from emerging in full force until late in the raspberry season.

"We're really learning right now just how bad it's gonna be," said Gerdeman, who also works with commercial growers in the county. She said those growers are reporting significant problems with the pest right now, especially in blueberry crops.

The 'squeeze test'

Though they don't have all the answers yet, researchers are continuing to study the fly as part of a five-year, multi-state program funded by $5.7 million from the U.S. Department of Agriculture Specialty Crop Research Initiative.

For now, they say the best method for protecting fruit is to follow a pesticide spray program once the fly has been detected.

Besides setting up traps near the fruit, Gerdeman said backyard growers or wild blackberry pickers can use the "squeeze test" for fruit. If it's mushy, it's more likely to have larvae inside. Berry pickers can also use a magnifying glass to look for tiny white filaments sticking out of the fruit, which the larvae use to breathe.

With the introduction of this new and widespread pest, Gerdeman said people might have to change the way they think about consuming fruit. Innocent-ly eating a few larvae in a berry won't hurt anyone and might be better than consuming the pesticides that would be necessary to keep them out, she said.

Pruning and tasting

Gerdeman said the research center's fruit fields, which generally are sprayed only for experiments, are a "perfect storm of flies" right now. But fruit fans touring them during the festival Saturday didn't seem to notice or mind.

One group admired the center's almost perfectly pruned fruit trees, which are maintained by a fleet of volunteers.

"I want you to come under this tree and see what a good pruning looks like," De Arbogast told a tour group as he led them toward an apple tree.

"That's the nice thing about this being a display garden is you can come here and you can see what it's supposed to look like."

That's exactly what brought Emily Watrous from north of Seattle to the Western Washington Fruit Research Foundation's festival Saturday. She has a too-tall cherry tree and a diseased apple tree in her backyard that she'd like to replace.

"It's frustrating to have (the fruit) but not able to eat it because it's too high and the birds eat it," Watrous said.

After tasting a few cherry varieties at the fruit festival, Watrous decided she'll plant a white gold cherry tree to replace her giant one at home.

Along with cherries, the festival featured some more unusual fruits for the tasting. A table offering fig varieties, many of which can be grown in the Northwest, was a popular stop.

And if that weren't enough to encourage widespread fig planting, volunteers also handed out samples of a purple-green sorbet that was made from the Ferndale-grown figs.

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