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Weather may sweeten Georgia watermelon crop

**By Brad Haire
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Cool, dry weather in early spring slowed the growth of Georgia's watermelon crop. But it's expected to recover quickly. And the melons may even be a little sweeter than normal by harvest time.

"We had some below-average temperatures in March and early April, and that happens from time to time," said Terry Kelley, a horticulturist with the University of Georgia Extension Service. "That put the crop a little behind in growth."

But Kelley believes the crop will have no problem recovering now that temperatures across the state have become consistently warmer.

Most of the crop was planted on schedule. Planting began around March 15. A majority of Georgia's watermelons are planted on irrigated land into beds covered in plastic.

But the drought postponed the planting of some melons on land without irrigation. Many of those melons are being planted now, he said.

"The peak of harvest may come a little later," he said. "But consumers will see no real difference. There should be plenty of melons for the Fourth of July market."

Georgia melons' big market is the July 4 holiday, when celebrating patriots include the sweet fruit in their cookout plans. Many growers schedule their planting each year to harvest fresh melons for this high-demand market.

Temperatures across the state have warmed. But despite the half-inch to inch of rain this week, dry weather remains across much of the state.

Watermelon growers don't like drought conditions. But they don't like rainy ones either, Kelley said.

Extremely wet springs and summers tend to increase disease problems for growers, who have to spend more money to control things like gummy stem blight. If the weather stays on the dry side, growers will have fewer disease problems.

Excessive moisture tends to

saturate melons, too, and make them less sweet. In dry conditions, the grower who can irrigate can better control how much water his crop gets.

Sunshine contributes to melon sweetness, too. Dry conditions mean less cloud coverage. Less cloud coverage means more sunshine and sweeter melons.

Georgia farmers historically plant 27,000 to 28,000 acres of melons each year. But they may end up planting more this year because watermelon prices were strong last year.

Georgia farmers planted 26,000 acres of watermelons last year and got an average of 7.8 cents per pound, about 2 cents higher than in 2002.

No definite estimates have been released for this year's crop.

Georgia ranks third behind Florida and Texas in watermelon production. The state's crop was worth about \$40 million last year.

(Brad Haire is a news editor with the University of Georgia College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences.)