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## Farmers upbeat about fruits of labor

Weather portends a bountiful harvest, growers say

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**BRENTWOOD** -- You don't need a calendar to know spring has arrived in eastern Contra Costa.

The fertile soil on the county's eastern edge is coming alive with the fruits of the upcoming summer harvest as sunny days, mild nights and a decent amount of rain have combined to create ideal growing conditions.

"We're looking for a banner year, really, unless something drastic happens between now and harvest," said Len Del Chiaro, a Brentwood farmer with 60 acres of cherry trees now in full bloom with their tiny, snow-white blossoms.

Throughout the county's agricultural core, growers are looking forward to a strong year and bountiful U-pick season, which will likely be in full swing Memorial Day weekend.

In addition to a mild winter and an increase in rain compared with last year, East County had enough of what farmers refer to as "chill hours" -- when temperatures drop to below 45 degrees -- to give the trees enough rest during their dormant season.

"It's kind of like a person getting a good night's sleep. You wake up charged, ready to go," said Brentwood grower Steve Pomeroy. "I don't know if it's scientific, but that works

for me."

Pomeroy, who farms 40 acres of cherries, peaches, nectarines, apricots and walnuts, has followed in his grandfather's footsteps for the past 20 years as a Brentwood grower. He said his Eureka Avenue orchards attract thousands of eager U-pickers throughout the roughly eight-week season.

"Everything looks real positive," Pomeroy said. "I think it will be a fun season for the U-pick."

U-pickers will have their hands on 2008's version of Harvest Time's ubiquitous trail map by the end of April, said Roy Gursky, a member of the cooperative marketing group formed by East County growers. The map, available at most farm stands and at many businesses, directs amateur harvesters to more than three dozen East County farm stands and U-pick orchards.

Paul Verdegaal, a farm adviser with the University of California Cooperative Extension, said in addition to early blooming stone fruits, some grape varieties, including chardonnay, are just starting to bud, and asparagus season started a few ago.

"Things in general are beginning to move," Verdegaal said.

The only thing that could threaten the optimistic-looking harvest would be a cold snap or late rain, said Meredith Nunn, owner of the Farmer's Daughter Produce at Walnut Boulevard and Marsh Creek Road. Any heavy rain in May would likely cause damage -- scars or cuts -- to the mature cherries, she said.

But if conditions continue as they have been for the past few weeks, produce buyers will have a variety of healthy fruit to choose from come mid-May, Nunn said.

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"We're just holding our fingers crossed," she said. "It's all up to Mother Nature at this point."

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