

U-Pick season getting off to an early start

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You might have to traverse minor detours around the Highway 4 bypass construction to get to some of the U-Pick farms in East County.

But local farmers say it will be worth the trek.

"The crops look like they should be bigger and better than ever," said Roy Gursky, a local walnut farmer. "We had good, cold days during the winter."

The nearly perfect winter means U-Pick season will begin a couple of weeks early this year, with some fruit stands opening this weekend. Most U-Pick operations will be open the following weekend.

The annual summer-long fruit-picking frenzy draws thousands of people from the Bay Area to load themselves with buckets of fruit from East County farms.

Growers are thrilled after a somewhat disappointing start to last year's U-Pick season, where some farms opened weeks late because of an unreliable winter, with unusually warm days followed by too much rain.

Fruit farmer Len Del Chiaro is preparing to open his U-Pick farm along Marsh Creek Road starting May 18, a weekend that is expected to attract more than 20,000 people, farmers say.

"It is the best crop we had in three or four years," Del Chiaro said. "We expect a pretty good crowd."

Still, Del Chiaro and other fruit farmers are concerned about how the Highway 4 bypass construction will confuse pickers this year. Although some say it will only cause minor detours and delays, other growers are preparing for what they believe could be a hassle for customers.

Crews are widening Marsh Creek Road as a part of the final stretch of the Highway 4 bypass project. The road construction, which started last year, is blocking access to some U-Pick farm operations, growers say.

"I won't make the opening like I hoped," said Meredith Nunn whose U-Pick farm has been closed since November because of the construction. "My place is still blocked off by the road construction; there is no way of getting into my place safely."

But Highway 4 project officials say crews plan to finish work on that segment of Marsh Creek Road, west of Walnut Boulevard by the end of next week.

After that, crews will begin working on Marsh Creek between Walnut Boulevard and Sellers Road, which will mean more traffic detours, said Dale Dennis, program manager with the State Route 4 Bypass Authority.

The construction companies will post electronic signs alerting people of detours along Marsh Creek Road, officials said.

"They are trying to plan so that they can detour people through the area and have it run steadily," said Ed Meyer, agricultural commissioner for Contra Costa County. "I believe it might add confusion at first, but there is a lot of effort being made to make sure the traffic is being diverted properly so that they can get through."

Also, farmers have distributed U-Pick maps across the region to help customers find their way around Brentwood's U-Pick stands, said Ken Hagan, president of Harvest Time, a nonprofit farming organization.

The road construction is not the only concern. Some farmers worry that the high gas prices will deter loyal Bay Area customers from making the lengthy trip out to Brentwood this year, said Ken Lucido of Seko Ranch Cherries, which will open Memorial Day Weekend for the U-Pick season.

Those farmers plan to entice customers by cutting deals on produce this year.

"We've lowered the price hoping people will come out," Lucido said, adding that the price for a pound of cherries will be \$2 this year instead of the usual \$2.50.

Even with detours and high gas prices, farmers are optimistic that families can still enjoy the annual U-Pick tradition.

"It is not just for the fruit, it's a family outing and experience," said Steve Pomeroy, a Brentwood fruit farmer. "Some have never seen a peach

on the tree before or picked one and ate it off the tree."

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For details about the U-Pick farms and locations, go to <http://www.harvest4you.com>

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