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Brian Gilroy takes a look at one of his trees. Gilroy has been “thinning” his apple crop by reducing the amount of fruit on trees to relief stress being caused by the heat and lack of rain. CHRIS FELL PHOTO

Apple growers coping with hot/dry weather conditions

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Apple growers in Meaford and The Blue Mountains are feeling the effects of the hot and dry weather.

The area has seen temperatures soar in recent weeks and there was been a lack of rain for most of the summer. Growers have been forced into extra work – including direct watering of trees – to compensate for the lack of rain.

The apple crop itself is in good

shape so far, but trees are showing stress from the heat and dry weather.

“Things are dry this year – dryer than they have been in awhile,” said Meaford apple grower Brian Gilroy. “I’ve heard the year 1946 being batted around as the last time we’ve seen it this dry.”

Gilroy, a director with the Ontario Apple Growers Association, said local growers are working hard to compensate for the lack of rain and protect their crops.

“Farmers have to be resourceful

when Mother Nature doesn’t provide for us. We have to provide,” he said. “In the perfect world, we would get one inch of rain per week.”

Farmers are actively reducing the load on their trees, thinning out the crop by picking and discarding apples before they mature (hand thinning of the crop is usually an annual process, in a dry year the amount of fruit taken off is increased), they are using their own irrigation system more extensively and, in some cases,

they are directly watering trees with farm equipment to ensure they are getting the moisture they need.

In recent years, local apple farms have been switching to high-density trees to increase efficiency and improve the overall quality of apples. High-density trees, which have smaller root systems, require a lot of water in their initial growing stages and irrigation systems must be installed when they are planted.

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Drought causing challenges for local growers

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The goal, Gilroy explained, is to ensure the apples continue to grow, despite the lack of natural moisture.

“As long as the apples don’t quit growing, you’re okay,” he said. “As soon as they stop growing, it’s hard to get them started again. Apple trees have a unique defense against heat. They will shut down around 30 C and go into a siesta mode.”

Greg Ardiel and his family have close to 300 acres of apple orchards in the Beaver Valley near Thornbury. His trees are watered through an irrigation system.

“It was the earliest we ever started (watering) this year – in mid-May,” he said. “We should have enough water to get through the year, but it will use every bit.”

Ardiel said the trees are “happy” and staying healthy. The crop is fine, but the constant watering is having an impact. Ardiel’s two large water tanks hold a combined 1.1 million gallons.

“We’re watering daily. There has been a lack of opportunity to shut the system down,” he said. “Last year we could shut it off and fill in the gaps when necessary.”

Ardiel guessed that, other than a heavy rainfall a few weeks ago, his farm has seen less than two



Desmond Crawford directly waters some young trees at Vail’s Orchard. CHRIS FELL PHOTO

inches of rain since May 1.

Lyndon Vail is a Meaford apple grower. He said his crops and trees are holding up well.

“Things are healthy, we just need more rain,” said Vail. “(Watering the trees directly) is all we can do with the young trees. With the bigger trees the apples don’t size. In

another month or so we’ll know for sure. (The apples) will be failing to size.”

Gilroy said a solid rainfall early in the morning on July 14 (and another over the weekend) helped staved off “desperation” for many local growers. Gilroy had his water sprayer hooked up to his tractor

and ready to go, but the rains delayed the need to water directly.

The heat and dry weather pose the biggest threat to newly planted high-density trees. It can cost a grower thousands of dollars to plant new trees, which don’t begin producing product for several years. The young trees need con-

stant water to grow and thrive.

“You can see in places where the trees are lacking. They’re not as vigorous and it’s the drought. They’re definitely stressed,” he said. “We’re doing the best we can with what we have. Generally speaking, farmers are very innovative and we are used to dealing with adversity.”



Meaford Public Library’s Lynne Fascinato will lead the DIY Library program. SUBMITTED PHOTO

Explore the power of your library card

Program showcases resources available

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Space is limited for this program. Register in advance at the library.

For more information and to register, visit meafordlibrary.on.ca or call 519-538-1060 ext. 1123.