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Drought, frost take toll on some farmers' harvests while others enjoy bounty by escaping nature's wrath

A harsh drought has led to a disappointing fall harvest for Town of Saukville pumpkin farmer Matt Bell.

A few customers looking for pumpkins have stopped at Bell's farm, only to leave empty-handed after learning the drought destroyed Bell's crop.

"One person stopped in and was very understanding. He saw me with what I had and just shook his head. He knew that it was a very dry year," Bell said.

Bell, who works on his father's farm on Hillcrest Road, said he realized the four acres of pumpkins he planted were in trouble by the first weekend in August.

"It wasn't until the weeds were coming through that I had to till up 50% and hold on to the other 50%," he said.

Half of what remained died from the hot, dry conditions in August. The frost in early September finished off the rest of the crop.

Bell said he lost $2,500 he invested in seeds, but the biggest waste comes from the work he put in over the past seven months.

“I think the disappointment is the time investment,” Bell said. “I’ve handled financial losses before, but it’s the thought that I put a lot of time into it.”

Bell planted winter wheat in his fields to help retain moisture in the soil.

Without an irrigation system, Bell said he, like many other area farmers, were at the mercy of Mother Nature to provide water.

“The places that do have pumpkins this year, they got lucky because they got one inch of rain that others didn’t. It’s still very dry around here,” Bell said.

Annette Spieker, of Spieker’s Pumpkin Farm in Random Lake, said she knows they are fortunate to have plenty of healthy sized pumpkins on their farm this October.

“We were blessed with a good crop considering it was extremely dry,” Spieker said. “I think anytime you’re growing something and you don’t get rain for weeks on end, you get concerned.”

A variety of pumpkins, squash and Indian corn planted on nearly 30 acres of land survived the drought, thanks to slightly higher rain totals in the area.

“Some of our land is a little bit lower, so that might have helped, also,” Spieker said.

When frost arrived a bit early, Spieker said, their pumpkins were large enough to handle it.

“I think the pumpkins were done growing just a little bit early this year, but we’re not disappointed with the fact that everything was ready,” she said.

Both Bell and Spieker said they are aware of the rough results that can happen following extreme weather.

“There’s no guarantees in nature,” Spieker said.

Image Information: A FEW PUMPKINS and other squash are all that remain of Town of Saukville farmer Matt Bell's fall crop. Most of his pumpkins were destroyed by the drought and early frost. At right, an extra inch or two of rain over the summer at Spieker's Farm in Random Lake resulted in a sea of pumpkins for Annette Spieker. Photos by Sam Arendt