

# *be picky*

A Fictional Account by Jim Chapman

There are three things to bear in mind if you decide to become a peach picker. All three things are relevant and will factor into your final picking adventure.

I mention these three things with some authority, as I am a former picker, specifically of the fuzzy crop varieties. Granted, this was a long time ago, and today I seldom pick anything itchier than a lottery ticket.

Still I will note, first, that the grass in an orchard, anytime from July onward, can be slippery from rotting fruit and seasonal monsoons – and further – that nothing adores juicy, rotting fruit as much as yellow jackets and wasps.

So plan on getting stung occasionally. But remember, stings won't kill you.

The easiest and fastest cure-all for a bite is to pinch a cigarette from a smoker, rip it in two and spit into the raw tobacco. Mix it up into a paste and press it into the sting area, then leave it on. Today, in our mostly tobacco-free and politically correct world, this treatment may not be an option. But perhaps – and I am speculating here, based upon these times – a sting can be treated with a stop-cramp tablet found in the emergency kit in one's unisex fanny pack as required by law for pickers.

Whatever the remedy, just remember, the sting pain won't last long and you'd be surprised at how quickly it's forgotten. Gradually you'll stop dreading the winged varmints and stop swatting at them, which, perhaps surprisingly, reduces the number of stings exponentially.

Second, realize up front that orchard owners do allow pickers to eat a few peaches as part of the compensation package. So you do not have to eat peaches on the sly, as if stealing chickens at night.

Now, the second part of this equation is: How much fruit is a reasonable amount to eat?

There is a temptation to gobble a bushel basket full of peaches that first day on the job, especially those juicy, sweet perfectly ripe ones with fine dewdrops glistening in the morning sun. Now, most pickers will eat one or two in a day. But sometimes, a new peach picker will overdo it and gobble a few dozen.

And here, we must talk consequences.

Because often, later in the day, after eating that half-bushel of peaches, this same picker will be seen scrambling, frantically searching for some type of paper – and some privacy.

“Great God Almighty!!” he says with wild eyes. “Any y’all gotta a napkin or envelope on you or in your truck?” There is a high tremor in his voice as they frantically dig through shirt pockets.

“Any y’all got a receipt? Newspaper? Old shirt? Slice of white bread?” Even a county agent’s slick brochure on chinch-mite eradication will suddenly be viewed as precious as lapis stone. The rotting sleeve of an old flannel shirt from under a car seat is suddenly as worthy as an English king’s banner of purple felt and stitched gold.

I have seen new crop pickers misjudge the cumulative effect of eating a bellyful of peaches. There is usually a moment of awareness, a strange white-lipped look at the horizon as if witnessing an alien invasion, then suddenly breaking into a mad bolt through the crop trees.

Usually novice pickers don’t know where they are going; it’s just reflex running, like when your body goes into spasms to dodge a biting dog or when it senses a coming bolt of lightning. This St. Vitus Dance-like usually ends badly once it starts, resulting in knots on the head and needing a change of personal garments.

So do be cautious when eating peaches. Enjoy a couple and call it a day. Remember, there are more peaches to eat tomorrow ... and the day after that.

Third, a note about picking attire: Peach fuzz is itchier, pound for pound, than a family of silkworms taking up residence in your drawers. Yes, it’s tempting to wear beach attire to pick peaches on a beautiful farm, just a tank top, shorts and open beach shoes. As if you’ll be soaking up rays in the beautiful countryside at a Roman villa garden, occasionally picking a peach or two. Might as well get a little sun, goes the thinking.

Yet, just the opposite is true.

The more skin you show, the more fuzz will have a chance to irritate you.

Dress like you’re heading into a mud clod fight down in the river bottom with your wildest cousins. Wear loose, dry clothes, or you will feel like ol’ king Tutankhamun wrapped tight in his mummy garb once those cotton clothes get wet. (Bring a change of dry clothes, too.) When choosing clothing, avoid those heavy, work jeans that weigh 15 or so pounds when wet as they rub the inner thighs to blistered gooseflesh.

Lightweight water repellent clothing is the best option.

As far as footwear, do not plan to wear flip-flops, as they give zero traction running from wasps on slick ground, especially uphill. Some new pickers, perhaps thinking of North Georgia as a world of barefoot farmers, might show up with bare feet to pick peaches. While this probably was OK in prehistoric times, before shoes, it is a bad choice today unless one wants “mechanic’s feet”, i.e., looking as if they can and have changed our truck transmissions with their feet.

Also, avoid those cute plastic rain boots they make for adults so they can look like third-graders because the constant walking and sweating, coupled with the humidity, stews the feet into a sweltering mini climate all of their own.

Sturdy but breathable shoes with water repellent qualities are best for the gig.

Of course, you may choose to ignore these three tips, and I myself but I have violated all three suggestions, individually and all at once. I will report that few things are worse than fierce humidity, a churning stomach, a bee sting or two and peach fuzz at work inside your skivvies.

Taken together, it makes for a tropical inferno to rival Dante's inferno – any day of the week.

I spent summers on and off for years as a peach picker. Having gone to school with the kids of the owners, they were, and still are, like family. Between jobs, if I needed work, I just drove up to the orchard. They always put me to work.

Most peach pickers back then tended to be young guys in their teens or 20s. And being young, a bit of tomfoolery sometimes happened, such as rotten peach fights and so on. I recall catching many a rotten peach in my ear. But no worries. After a couple of days, pretty much all of the rotten peach juice finally weeps out of my inner ear canal.

Green peaches? Well, now, that's another matter.

If you've never been whacked hard on the head with a green peach, well, it makes a sound that you won't ever forget, sort of like a horse biting down on a crisp apple, underwater. Don't fear the green peach, though; it happens so fast and unexpectedly it doesn't hurt at all. In fact, if you see a picker giggling and walking at an angle to the ground, it may be that he has been struck by a green peach and is "walking it off."

But tomfoolery never lasts long because the owner keeps an ear out for such. He helps keep the pickers focused on loading the baskets of the magical fruit, and getting that fruit to the hungry customers.

Do realize that a crop field is a cosmopolitan site. Plan to meet people from all walks of life and know the resulting exchange of backgrounds is never dull. Once, when I was a teen, a middle-aged man arrived to pick. His cool demeanor and the ever-present cigarette dangling from his snarled lip gave a hint of his cool demeanor lurking behind the reflecting aviator shades under his mop of curly hair.

He filled the heads of the younger guys with his tales of seedy adventure in ports and shacks around the world. Oh, he had seen it all.

He was what they called, in his part of the world, a "stud muffin," he said.

He was convinced that all guys ought to get the type of education he had, the kind of education where you get in a car at night when the windows steam up really fast after a woman in high heels and a faux rabbit-skin coat gets inside the car and slams the door hard behind her.

While today we exist largely in a digital make-believe world, the orchard exists solely and unapologetically in the real world. These orchards and farms of the world stock the shelves of the nations' stores and they fill our bellies. And souls, too, I believe.

Because, if you ever worked as a picker, you sense the connection between the good Mother Earth and the life that stirs inside you. No one has truly enjoyed a peach more than one who has picked a peach or so in their life. And no one who has ever picked crops forgets to silently thank the pickers for the job they do.

John Steinbeck once wrote that real life was happening out in the fields, the woods and byways – not in musty classrooms, boardrooms and committee meeting rooms.

I believe there's a lot to this idea.

Because, in my mind, nothing beats sitting on a tailgate of a truck on Saturday evening as the owner pays up the peach pickers. The owner paid the pickers quite well and, in turn, lots of young folks learned the idea of a real day's pay for a real day's work, old school version.

And in those certain moments, after quitting time on payday, heading home with a gangster roll of cash, car windows rolled down, awash in the smells of evening dew and mowed lawns, life suddenly seemed even sweeter than ... a Georgia Belle.

And that, my friend, is a very, very tough feat to pull off.

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