PORT SULPHUR (AP) — Nearly two years of experiments with peaches have produced encouraging results for Louisiana citrus farmers who are hoping peaches will become an alternative crop to oranges, which are more vulnerable to freezing weather.

The LSU Citrus Research Station here conducted the research.

"We were looking for a complementary crop," said Alvin Adams, director of the research center. "We needed something that could accompany the oranges while they were making their comeback."

Three consecutive freezes killed nearly all of south Louisiana's 120,000 orange-producing trees. And farmers, wary of possible future losses, left about half of their groves unplanted after the most recent freeze in 1984.

Adams said he hopes area orange growers, most of them located in Plaquemines Parish, will consider adding peach trees to their groves.

Peaches were the natural choice to replace oranges because the same equipment is used for both, Adams said. Also, peaches are ideally suited to south Louisiana's mild climate, he said. And, unlike oranges, peaches are less subject to damage from the area's occasional winter freezes.

Peach growing does have its drawbacks.

It is much more labor-intensive than growing oranges, said Alan Fehrman, an associate county agent with the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service.

"It's much harder to grow peaches in your spare time," Fehrman said. "They require a lot of attention."

In addition to extra pruning and thinning, peaches must be picked within a few days of becoming ripe, while oranges will keep on the tree for two weeks or more, Fehrman said.

South Louisiana growers, most of whom used their groves as a hobby or an investment, probably would not have the extra time to tend a large peach crop, Fehrman said.

Rene Chauvin of Nairn, who has replanted only a third of his orange groves since they were destroyed, decided three years ago to give peaches a try.

"The fruit was real good. I had some beautiful peaches," Chauvin said. "Unfortunately, the birds enjoyed them just as much."

Chauvin said he is not planning on expanding his peach crop.

Despite the problems with peaches, Fehrman thinks the fruit has potential.

"I've received quite a few calls from people who are discouraged with citrus and are looking for an alternative crop," he said. "I think peaches might have a future around here."

To help push the new crop, the citrus research station has given away about 250 peach trees to area growers, Adams said. And, Adams says, there has been one good sign that peaches have potential in south Louisiana.

"We've had good success selling them on the roadside," Adams said of the experimental peaches. "They're a hit with the public."