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Cosette Boxrud, 11, right, catches blueberries in her mouth while her mother Katie Boxrud, and her brother Tristan Boxrud, 13, pick blueberries at Heavenly Wheels Blueberry Farm on May 21, 2024.
PHOTOS BY RON HOLMAN / VISALIA TIMES-DELTA

Blueberry season arrives early

Meade Trueworthy
Special to Visalia Times-Delta | USA TODAY NETWORK

The exceptionally warm early spring means that blueberry season has already arrived in the Valley, and it is opening weekend for Heavenly Wheels Blueberry Farm.

With a name dedicated to their faith and love of vintage cars, Heavenly Wheels Blueberry Farm is owned and run by the Wendt family.

This month Heavenly Wheels enters its 11th season of providing locals the opportunity to enjoy farm life, surrounded by beautiful rose bushes, vintage cars for photos, kid-size vehicles to ride on and plenty of space to roam and pick a variety of blueberries in this family-friendly space.

Located between Visalia and Exeter, visitors have the opportunity to wander the fields and pick berries at their leisure. Buckets are provided and taste testing is encouraged.

"We love seeing the kids come back from the field with blue lips from eating the berries while they pick," owner Susan Wendt said. "This is a family farm and we want people to enjoy being outside. Everyone is welcome to eat as many berries as they want."

After picking as many ripe blueberries as desired, guests take their buckets to be weighed and pay for their berries by the pound. There are also pre-picked berries available to purchase.

"If you like the Snowchasers this is the time to come," Susan Wendt said. "They are the first variety. If you want the more sweet ones you might want to wait about a week. This is the ideal time to pick Snowchasers."



Victoria Finn, 5, of Hanford gathers blueberries she picked at Heavenly Wheels Blueberry Farm on May 21, 2024.

Blueberry season runs from now until June, depending on the weather and when each variety of blueberry is ripe. Hours vary from week to week so be sure to look for updates on Heavenly Wheels Instagram page.

What to know when you go

- **Open:** 2 to 7 p.m. on Saturday, April 18 and 10 a.m.-7 p.m. on Sunday, April 19
- **Daily hours** to be announced weekly starting Thursday, April 23.
- **Located:** 18325 Ave. 312, Visalia
- **Reminders:** It can be hot and sunny in the fields, don't forget to wear hats and sunblock.

Gubernatorial debate comes as California race heats up

Daniella Segura
Palm Springs Desert Sun | USA TODAY NETWORK

In an unexpected turn of events, Eric Swalwell dropped from the California governor's race after allegations of sexual assault surfaced.

While the full implications of his departure have yet to come to fruition, one thing is apparent: It's been a "wakeup call for Democrats," said politics editor of NewsNation and The Hill Chris Stirewalt, who will host pre- and post-debate coverage of Nexstar's "Debate Night in California: The Race for Governor" for The Hill on April 22.

"I think for a lot of California Democrats, (the primary race) didn't become real until Eric Swalwell's demise, right?" said Stirewalt, who also hosts "The Hill Sunday with Chris Stirewalt."

There were, of course, "political diehards," who were engaged and participating from the get-go, Stirewalt said. However, with "10 million Democrats running," the election was a problem for another time for most primary voters.

But then came the fallout from the allegations against Swalwell.

"I think that the effect of Swalwell is to cause California Democrats to have to engage with this election in a more serious way," Stirewalt said.

And in the first Emerson poll conducted since Swalwell's departure from the governor's race, the field of Democratic candidates has shuffled, so much so that it's altered the debate, which is scheduled 7-8 p.m. Wednesday, April 22, statewide across Nexstar's television stations in California.

To participate in the debate, candidates need to meet a threshold of at least 5% of likely voters.

Before the most recent poll, just two Republicans — Steve Hilton and Chad Bianco — and two Democrats — Tom Steyer and Katie Porter — met the standard.

But, since Swalwell left the race, two more Democrats now also meet the threshold: Xavier Becerra and Matt Mahan.

Swalwell's departure is causing Democrats to focus. "Not just in the narrow sense of where will his voters go, but in the broader sense of: OK. Guys, we got to get serious. What are we really going to do here?" Stirewalt said.

Possibility of Democrats being locked out diminishes

For what felt like months, concerns about Democrats being locked out of the general election swirled.

So much so, that Democratic Party leaders commissioned a series of polls to assess the candidates' viability in the race, in hopes of narrowing the vast field of Democrats.

"I think the relative weakness of the field has caused Democrats to delay their point of decision," Stirewalt said.

See **DEBATE**, Page 6A

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