



Strawberry Farming Through the Year

Do you like to eat strawberries? Here is how farmers grow them in North Carolina and nearby states. These pictures are from several different farms.



In the summer, we get the land ready to plant. We use a tractor and disk to break up the soil and add fertilizer that will feed the plants as they grow.



The next step is to form the soil into raised beds.



Then, we use the tractor – pulling an implement called a bedder – to lay black plastic over the bed.



The edges of the plastic are buried in the soil. The plastic helps hold moisture in the soil, keeps the ground warmer during the winter, and prevents weeds from growing.



The machine lays down a strip of drip irrigation tape under the plastic. We will run water through this tape to the plants as they grow.



As the plastic is laid, the soil can be fumigated under the plastic to kill diseases and weeds.



Next, we spread ryegrass seeds over the field, so the ryegrass will grow between the beds. This helps prevent soil erosion when it rains.



Here the ryegrass has started growing and the farmer has started to plant this field.



We don't plant seeds—instead we set out small plants. These plants can be plugs like these, grown in trays with root balls for each plant.



Or they can be bare-root plants like these.



The bare root plants are set out by hand.



Plug plants can be set out with the help of a machine, which also puts water into each hole.



The crew rides on the back of the planter. The crew can be hired workers...



Or it can be family! For either type of plant, we set out about 15,000-16,000 plants per acre.



We make sure to get our overhead irrigation set up before we set out the plants.



At this time of year, we water both through the drip lines and through the overhead irrigation.



As soon as the plants are set out, they need to be irrigated a lot to help them get established.



Sometimes while the crew is still setting plants in another part of the field.



Deer like to eat strawberry plants, so many farmers put up electric fences to keep them out of the field. This fence is on a slant, which confuses the deer and makes them less likely to jump over.



However, the fence doesn't always work!



By November, the plants have become established and the ryegrass is growing between the beds.



All fall, we will keep an eye on the plants for pests and diseases and water them through the drip if necessary.



This is a row cover. Many strawberry growers use them to protect the plants from cold, like a blanket. Row covers let air and water through, but help keep plants warmer.



Putting covers on for a few weeks in the fall can help the plants produce more berries in the spring.



Winter temperatures below 15 degrees can hurt the plants. If extreme cold is forecast, growers may pull row covers over the field to protect the plants from cold. It is a tough job on a windy day!



Net bags filled with rocks are useful for weighing down the edges of the row covers.



By February, the plants begin to grow and make new leaves.



We start fertilizing the plants through the drip line and become even more watchful about diseases and pests, treating the plants if necessary.



Starting in February and March, the plants begin to flower. Now, our main worry is frost, which can kill the delicate buds, flowers, and young berries.



Our main tool for protecting these flowers is overhead irrigation.



It is actually the water freezing that keeps the plants warm, not the coating of ice that forms. We have to start the irrigation before the temperature at the plant reaches freezing, and run it until the air temperature is above freezing again.



**We are up all night on those very cold nights,
keeping the irrigation going.**



Row covers are also used for frost protection, either alone or with irrigation.



A lot of ice has built up on these row covers!



We can tell if frost has damaged a flower. The center of a frost-damaged flower will be black instead of yellow, and it will never develop into a berry. Fortunately, new blossoms will open after these.



We can also tell if we have done our job well, because there will be lots of flowers and lots of green berries getting bigger and bigger.



It takes about a month for a flower to become a ripe berry.



Plants will have flowers and berries at different stages of ripeness for many weeks.



Fruit picked fully ripe, like the two berries at the far right, has the most flavor, sweetness, and nutrition.



Most of our farms invite people to come pick their own strawberries.



Picking strawberries is a fun activity for the whole family.



Customers may pick just a quart or they may take home lots of berries to freeze or make jam.



Most farms also sell already-picked berries on the farm or at roadside stands.



Farmers also take their berries to farmers' markets.



Some growers sell berries to stores, schools, and restaurants. These workers are picking directly into the containers that will go to the stores.



During the NC strawberry season, watch for local strawberries in the stores! You support local growers when you buy them and you will know they had a short trip from the field to you. Strawberries from other areas are available in supermarkets year-round.



Strawberries are low calorie, fat-free, and high in Vitamin C. They have many nutritional benefits. Strawberry shortcake is a traditional favorite use.



Strawberry jam and frozen strawberries are ways to enjoy local strawberries year-round.



Visit our website for more
information and
lots of recipes!
www.ncstrawberry.com