

Irrigation helps strawberries

NEWARK, Del. — Strawberries are one of the Delmarva peninsula's most traditional fruit crops. It's the earliest of the season and needs to be managed well.

One of the best ways to boost yields, according to University of Delaware extension vegetable specialist Ed Kee, is to irrigate the crop during critical growth stages.

"In planning an irrigation program for strawberries," he says, "keep in mind these three basic facts. First, the earliest runners are the best potential yielders. This means it pays to encourage runner development soon after planting, and to renovate established beds after harvest to further encourage runners.

Second, the more leaves present, the more opportunities for buds to develop and the better the potential for high yields. This is another reason to encourage runner growth.

Third, cell size of the fruit bud is determined in late August and September. If favorable growing conditions exist then, bigger cells can develop, resulting in bigger berries the next spring. This also translates into better yields.

Watering newly set-out plants gets them off to a good start during dry weather; and watering during fruit development improves berry size and yield. But Kee says irrigation also affects future yield during two other growth stages — after bed renovation, and during the dry spells in late August and September.

Irrigating after renovation encourages runner development, which leads to more fruit buds. Irrigating in late summer may increase fruit size the following spring.

In a study conducted at the University of Missouri, strawberry yields increased dramatically under late-season irrigation. Two

irrigations in September increased yields the following spring by over 5,000 quarts per acre over the nonirrigated check plot. Three additional irrigations in August and September added another 4,000 quarts per acre the following spring.

Strawberry plants may suffer drought stress before showing symptoms, Kee warns. Under normal conditions a plant uses 0.15 inch of water a day — more in dry weather. Under hot, windy con-


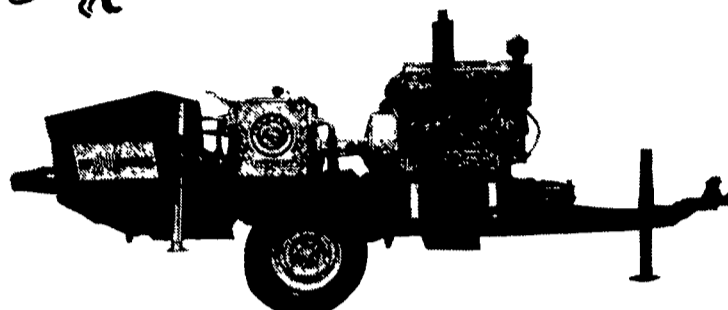
ditions, plants can easily reach the wilting point in five to seven days. He suggests growers schedule irrigations by recording daily temperature and evaporation rates. A tensiometer will also help monitor soil moisture.

"Remember, irrigation can play a major role in increasing strawberry yields," the specialist concludes. "You can use it to encourage more runners earlier, and also to increase the number and size of next year's berries. Consider irrigating at these development stages: at planting, at pre-harvest, after renovation, and during late August and September.

"Growers often need their irrigation equipment for other crops during some of these stages, and strawberries may not have top priority," says Kee. "But there may be strong economic reasons to allocate more water to strawberries during any or all of these periods in the plant's growth."

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