

Slow. Slow as molasses in January.

That was a familiar saying of my family's, used to describe something or someone that took way more time than necessary to accomplish a particular task. If you've ever tried to pour molasses in cold weather — molasses stored in the unheated pantries of an earlier era — the phrase is self-explanatory.

And it certainly describes the state of our strawberries this June. We were beginning to wonder if the strawberries would be ripe by Independence Day. Fact is, trying to get to the berry harvest has been a battle all season.

This is the first year of bearing for our rejuvenated little patch of strawberry plants, re-done last

summer after the old planting had worn out. Strawberry plantings, like the alfalfa hay stands most of us area dairy producers raise to feed our "girls," generally have only a few years of really productive life in our southcentral Pennsylvania climate, then need to be replanted. Our patch pretty much gave out two years ago, supplemented by a more reliable supply of berries from nearby "U-pick" plantings.

For the last several weeks, we had watched the development of the new patch. And wondered if we would harvest any at all strawberries this year. One early May morning brought the surprising and disappointing revelation that the first blooms were opening with black centers - death by

unexpected frost. Apparently the temperatures had dropped even further than we'd been aware earlier that week; a layer of floating row cover went over the plants during the next chilly stretch.

Then, the unreasonable lack of moisture threatened to greatly curtail the remaining berry yield. I lamented to The Farmer about mid-May that, if the berries didn't soon have a good watering, we could kiss goodbye the possibility of another year's harvest of ice-cream topping and jam material. Timely, welcome rains — even a downpour or two — came to the rescue and the languishing little green berries swelled and grew fat.

Gradually, a berry or two along the edge began to take on a pinkish-orange hue. We made almost daily checks on their progress. Then one day, the earliest visible berry, about two-thirds red-ripe, had a gigantic bite taken out of the red part.

Expected culprits lurked all over the yard. Robins. And our gregarious, noisy mockingbirds. While we enjoy having both these friendly species of birds around, their taste for berries points them right at the strawberries, raspberries and one surviving blueberry bush. They love our strawberries.

There's a limit to friendship and tolerance. Gobbling up our small supply of carefully-watched strawberries crosses that line.

Having already battled frost and escaped berry-patch drought, I instituted the next safeguard — lengths of discarded hay net-wrap. When the round baler monitor registers that a bale has reached the proper size, it goes into a beeping mode for the machine to be activated to wrap lengths of the nylon netting around the roll of hay. The netting keeps the bale tightly wrapped and helps it shed water if stored outside. It's similar to the material available in garden centers for the express purpose of covering fruit crops from hungry feathered friends. We just happen to have oodles of it available as a crop discard.

Birds tend to avoid the netting because of an instinctive sense of entanglement. Its effectiveness

was demonstrated to me again a few weeks ago, when I found one of our noisy barnyard roosters with his feet firmly wrapped into a piece of the stuff. He screeched, squawked, and flopped me; you'd have thought I planned to attack his neck rather than free his feet. I finally more or less had to sit on him to cut the net-wrap loose with a sharp scissors.

Smarter than the squawky rooster, the berry-loving birds have learned to tip-toe alongside the edge of the patch and take a peck of any berry not totally enveloped in the netting. Plus, something is busy under the netting — something that lives in holes in the ground and had taken bites out of about two dozen berries found while picking the other day.

If we confirm that it's a rat, as suspected, there will be a side-dish offered with the strawberries.

And ... it won't be ice cream.

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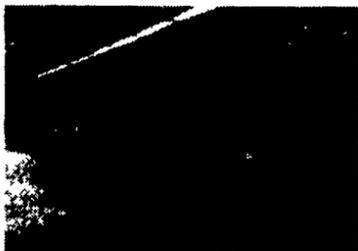
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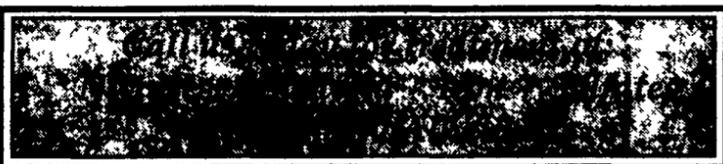
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