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This year, early hot weather started some blooms early, especially the early variety, Early Glow, which experienced moderate frost damage. At left is a bloom with frost damage and at right is a healthy bloom.

Strawberry Picking

(Continued from Page 1)

The farm includes 260 acres in corn, used to feed the steers, and about 130 acres of potatoes, managed by Paul's son, Ernie.

The farm includes another 60 acres in small grain, including wheat, and soybeans.

Together the family cares for about 3-4 acres of strawberries. The Masts have been growing strawberries since 1984.

Then, Paul said he had planned to establish a pick-your-own (PYO) farm. He planted five acres in the beginning, but found out the PYO didn't have a large enough customer base.

In 1986, the farm stand was constructed. From there, sales improved. The Masts have also sold strawberries to local grocery stores.

Mast noted the huge amount of traffic along Rt. 23. The good part is the "ridge" that separates acres helps keep the berries high, out of the valleys, and away from frost damage.

The Masts use conventional matted rows bedded with either wheat or rye straw.

Springtime proves best for discing up ground and re-planting. At bloom, a hoe is used to control thistle and dandelion.

Picking begins around the first of June or near Memorial Day Weekend, Mast said, depending on the weather. Picking continues until about the third week in June.

Jim Groff, field manager, noted that the challenge was dealing with the farm labor. Helping train more than a dozen seasonal workers to pick the rows correctly and package the material can prove frustrating.

"Getting them to show up on time, ready to pick, is the worst part," said Groff. "Watching who does what, getting the picking right — those are challenges."

Also, the timeliness of harvest is critical. "If it's six o'clock and it's time to set up, and labor is not available," said Groff, "then we have to make some phone calls."

The stand was open from 8 a.m. to noon every day except Sunday. Sometimes it was open until 5 p.m. if the harvest was good. Friday and Saturday were the busiest days.

"You do the best you can," Mast said. "There is no formula."

Strawberries are harvested in quarts and four-quart baskets. Groff plants about 15,000 plants per acre.

How much for the berries? The Masts charge \$3 per quart or about \$11 per basket.

Overall, it was easier to pick the strawberries to sell at the stand, though the Masts still allow PYO if requested.

This year, early hot weather started some blooms early, especially the early variety, Early Glow, which experienced moderate frost damage. But the stand looks good.

The new plantings this year are equipped with trickle irrigation lines. The drip lines will help ensure a prolonged growing season.

Last year, at the end of the season, growers experienced what many consider the worst drought in state history. Groff noted that overhead irrigation was used. Though it softened and scalded some berries, the flush produced berries longer — so the Masts could extend the season a week or two.

However, the renovated berries that didn't get a soaking irrigation didn't recover as well.

At the end of the season, the strawberries are mowed. Renovation takes place. After renovation, according to soil recommendations, fertilizer is applied.

Last year, Paul Mast noted, (Turn to Page 6)

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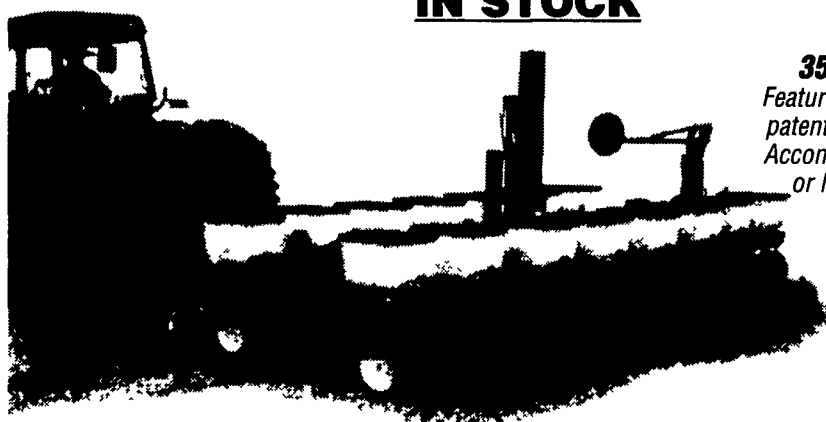
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