

At Strawberry Renovation

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When selecting a site for planting strawberries, growers should choose one with good drainage and one that is not low, where it would tend to get frost damage.

Also, applying a fungicide to label rates at the critical bloom time, from April through May, will help control gray mold. "The mold starts in the blossom," said Ressler. "The critical time for application is during the bloom period."

For the spores to activate, the bloom has to be wet for 6-8 hours in order for the mold to start. If irrigating with overhead equipment, limit the times during the day, from 10 a.m.-2 p.m., so the plants can dry off. Irrigating at night can spell real problems in trying to control the fungus.

The new strawberry plasticulture is in use by a fifth of the growers in the county. Use is growing because, under the system, drip lines supply adequate moisture; the fruit remains dirt-free; and time between planting and harvesting is narrowed, thus creating faster and more efficient returns on investment.

The shortfalls to the use of a plastic mulch-based system: it works well for one season and has to be replaced. However, with proper management, the plastic mulch system can be maintained,

with pruning and renovation, like a conventional site and provide fruit for several seasons.

Varieties that are suitable to the use of plastic must be used. Special management is necessary to adopt the Northeast varieties of strawberries to plasticulture.

(Ressler noted that the Northeast varieties common to growers, including Jewel and Early Glow, work well in a conventional matted row with straw bed. California varieties are more adapted to the use of drip irrigation underneath plastic mulch.)

Conventional rows should be 12 inches on 36-44-inch centers. Plastic, two-row systems can measure 36 inches wide, set on a single raised bed with the beds on 5-6 foot centers.

In an ideal conventional system, after harvest, herbicide must be applied to control weeds. Then, using a rototiller, the rows must be renovated so that runners will stay within the row. A preemergence herbicide should be applied after rototilling to provide residual weed control.

Fertilizer must be added according to soil test recommendations.

Ressler recommends about 50-60 pounds of nitrogen per acre at renovation and another 20 pounds per acre in late August or early September.

Ideal soil pH for strawber-

ries is 6-6.5. The plant uses more potash than phosphorous, so it is critical, Ressler noted, to watch for regular soil test recommendations.

As for the "ideal" year, a grower can look for good moisture at blossom set, 1-2 inches of rain one night per week, plenty of sunshine and cool temperatures, and proper soil fertility.

With those conditions on a conventional system, growers can probably harvest 4,000-5,000 quarts per acre. Occasionally, with ideal conditions, 8,000 quarts per acre can be possible, as long as there is a "good stand, no frost damage, a good high-yielding strawberry variety, adequate moisture, and control of plant pests," Ressler said.

Of particular concern is the tarnished plant bug, which can feed during bloom time. Proper pesticides are needed to control potential plant damage.

The issue of labor requirements to harvest the fruit can prove critical to the grower. For new growers, starting a pick-your-own (PYO) operation can take time to market the business and build up clientele. Per acre, PYO can generate good revenue, since there are few labor considerations.

For those starting who want to harvest and sell the strawberries at farm stand or

auction, conventional rows can prove less expensive. For plastic rows, costs can rise to about \$2,000 per acre. "Fumigation with methyl bromide alone can cost up to \$1,700 per acre," Ressler said. Fungicide applications can run up to \$150 per acre.

And having bee colonies can help in plant pollination and fruit set. Though the strawberry plant is self-pollinating, growers have shown that bee pollination will help get a better crop.

Site considerations should be made. Growers should not plant in a valley, which can be subject to frost damage. Use a good, well-drained site with good tilth, and plant the bareroot stock in April. The blossoms are snapped off the first year to ensure the plant's energy goes to the runners to develop good plant size and fruit-bearing ability the next season. Cultivate and train the runners to stay in the row. For those wanting a plasticulture system, plant in late August or early September. With this system, plugs are inserted through the black plastic rows with a waterwheel planter. When the blooms appear in the spring, after fungus and other pests are managed, the fruit can be ready to harvest.

A great benefit to plasticulture strawberries is the "quick return on invest-

ment," said Ressler.

Whatever system is used, growers should start small, perhaps with a quarter acre or so. Also, when using plastic, disposal issues are key—the plastic must be sent to the solid waste management authorities in the area.

"It should not be buried or burned on the farm," Ressler noted. "Open burning of plastic waste is a major source of pollution which can easily be eliminated."

For those switching from tobacco to alternative crops, strawberries can provide some of the best income. But they are perishable, noted Ressler, which means they have to be marketed promptly.

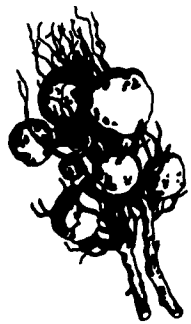
Ressler said there are several production guides available. They include:

- The NRAES Strawberry Production Guide, covering the Northeast, Midwest, and East, available for \$45.

- The "Commercial Berry Production and Pest Management Guide 2000-2001," available from Penn State, for \$10.

- The Small Fruit Crop Management Book, ed. by Gene J. Galletta and David G. Himelrick, Prentice Hall, 1990.

For information on these guides or strawberry production, contact Ressler at (717) 394-6851.



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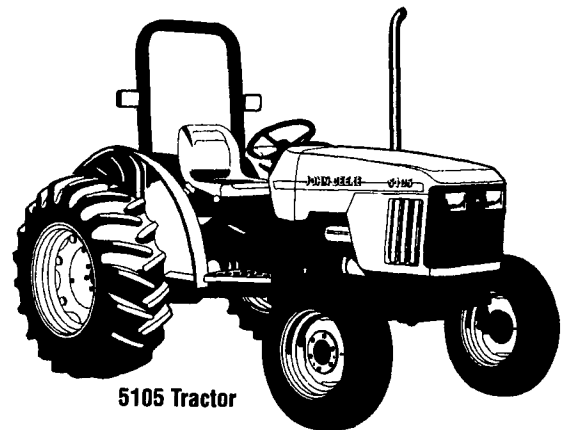
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