

Strawberry Plasticulture Offers Sweet Rewards

PIKETON, Ohio — Excess rainfall last spring worked to the disadvantage of many Ohio farmers, with the exception of a few unique strawberry producers. Despite the rain, strawberry research plots at the Ohio State University Extension South Centers sat high and dry on a bed of plastic mulch, said Brad Bergefurd, an Ohio State Extension horticulture agent.

"Plasticulture production may be a good option for Ohio strawberry growers to increase their yields on small-acreage farms," Bergefurd said. Ohio State researchers have been working with North Carolina extension agents and specialists to test plasticulture methods for strawberries, which produce earlier and higher, more consistent yields for North Carolina growers.

"If we can get strawberries to harvest two to three weeks earlier, that will get farmers in the markets earlier and possibly increase their income," Bergefurd said. "The potential is there to double yields on a more consistent basis than with the matted row system."

The plasticulture method could increase the typical 5,000 to 6,000 pounds per acre to 10,000 to 12,000. At this point, the smallest yield for the research trials was 11,000 pounds per acre, Bergefurd said.

"The work done so far looks really promising, but we only have one year under our belt and a long way to go," he said.

Traditionally, most Ohio-

grown strawberries are bare-root plants planted in matted rows in the spring. In plasticulture, soil is mounded into 10-inch-high mounds and covered with a sheet of black, plastic mulch, Bergefurd said. Strawberry plant plugs are then planted in September through the mulch into the underlying mounds of soil.

Plants raised in plasticulture usually experience fewer disease problems from standing water and flooding problems because the water rests in between the mounds or rows, Bergefurd said. At the same time, the sheet of mulch conserves moisture, reduces weed growth by blocking out the sun, and keeps the strawberries cleaner by keeping them out of the mud.

The black mulch also absorbs heat so that the soil stays warmer to increase plant growth, Bergefurd said. Heat absorption warms the soil earlier in the spring and later in the fall, benefiting yields.

"More and more Ohio vegetable growers, especially fresh market, are using black plastic mulch because of its benefits," he said.

"The biggest drawback in plasticulture is the cost," Bergefurd said. "Over \$10,000 an acre is invested in plasticulture strawberries before you ever pick your first strawberry. In addition, another \$3,000 is needed to take the crop through harvest." These costs, figured by North Carolina agents and specialists, include every ex-

pense from a computer to Internet connection to a mulcher.

The plasticulture strawberry growers in North Carolina replant every season to maintain high yields. Ohio matted row growers typically replant every three to four years, Bergefurd said. Despite the annual \$10,000-per-acre investment, the higher, more consistent yields in plasticulture strawberries result in more income for growers than matted row acres.

Ohio State researchers are comparing notes with Maryland researchers on a two-year system that could eventually be an option. "If we could use a two-year system, it would stretch the \$10,000 over a longer time period," he said.

Only a few growers have made the switch to plasticulture, which is more commonly used in vegetable production, Bergefurd. "I could see matted row growers planting an acre or two of plasticulture strawberries to kick off their season earlier and stretch their income a little longer.

"If this system takes off, we could start a whole other business," Bergefurd said. "The new system would hit greenhouses when they're not busy, allowing them to produce the strawberry plant plugs needed by the growers, so it will give them a whole new market. And earlier harvested strawberries would also allow growers to begin marketing Ohio strawberries as early as Mother's Day, which could produce an earlier income for farmers."

PPA Names Leucanthemum 'Becky' 2003 Perennial Plant Of The Year

COLUMBUS, Ohio — The Perennial Plant Association (PPA) has named *Leucanthemum* "Becky" the 2003 Perennial Plant of the Year.

Leucanthemum "Becky" is praised for its long bloom season and its ability to stand well in heat and humidity," said Dr. Steven Still, PPA executive director. "Becky" can be used in "borders, containers, or in naturalized areas."

"Becky" is a single, white daisy with sturdy stems that do not require staking. The

two- to three-foot tall plant begins flowering in late June and, if deadheaded, flowers into late August and September. This perennial performs well in USDA Hardiness Zones 4 to 9. It grows in average garden loam and full sun.

The selection of *Leucanthemum* "Becky" landmarks the 14th year for the Perennial Plant of the Year program.

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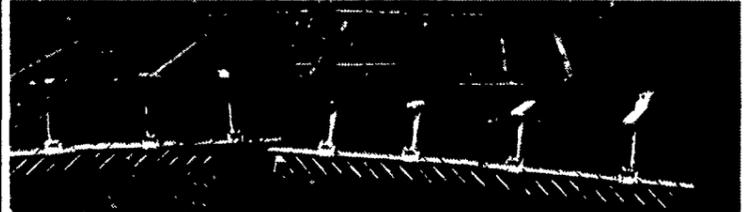


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