

Now there's A Good Idea! A Consultant's Notebook

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It sometimes seems that there are as many ideas about the best way to grow strawberries as there are strawberry growers! There are continually new techniques and products that strawberry growers and the people who advise them need to look at and evaluate. Farmers have inquiring minds and are the source of many of these great ideas. Consultants, Cooperative Extension Small Fruit Specialists, scouts, and some of the industry sales representatives get to see lots of different strawberry farms and ways of doing things over the course of time. The different planting and bedding systems, irrigation systems, fertility, and pest management are some of the topics that we will look at in this presentation. Soils are different, varieties are different, and people are different. Therefore, there is no one right way to raise strawberries-but some practices sure do work well for some people!

First, let's decide what the beginning point for a strawberry crop is. For a crop that is yet to be planted, I feel that a full year before planting is needed to prepare the site. Deep tillage, soil sampling, adding needed soil amendments, two to three cover crops with a weed destroying tillage between each, and rock picking the year before planting a strawberry crop will help to assure several years of success for the crop. For an established crop, successful growers recognize that next years strawberry crop begins with renovation and the sooner that it is begun after the last picker leaves the field, the better.

Prior to planting the crop, the grower needs to decide what type of production system to use. Will the crop be raised on a ridge, in a matted row, in a plasticulture system? The system employed determines the planting density and is the basis for determining how many plants to order. We will look at some of these choices in the presentation.

Irrigation is a serious consideration for a strawberry grower. Some of us who advise farmers caution that you may not even want to consider raising strawberries if you are not able to irrigate. Frost protection provided by irrigation during bloom is important in many growing seasons. Irrigation is also helpful for crop growth, to help to activate herbicide applications, and after renovation to ensure adequate plant growth and flower bud development for the next year's crop. Some growers utilize a couple of different irrigation techniques in the course of the season. While overhead irrigation is needed for frost protection, some growers use less labor intensive and more water efficient systems such as drip tape or center pivot irrigation systems at other times of the year.

Strawberries are not heavy users of nutrients compared to crops like corn, potatoes, and pumpkins, but they need what they need in the correct amounts at the proper times. Soil sampling and tissue sampling are management tools that many growers use to determine what the limiting nutrient factors are for their crop. There are lots of nutrient sources available. Knowing what source to use at what point in the crop cycle is useful. For instance, if magnesium is needed, ground dolomitic limestone may

be the least expensive source, but if it is not applied and incorporated prior to planting it will not be readily available to the crop, whereas magnesium sulfate (Epsom salts) sprayed on the crop in a foliar application will immediately provide magnesium to the crop. Significant increases in yields have been obtained by growers who have learned how to micromanage the strawberry crop with plant growth regulators and nutrient amendments at the proper time.

Pest management is critical to good strawberry production. Weeds are often the most crop limiting pest and most costly to control of all the pests that growers deal with. No matter what technique growers use, hand weeding and cultivation, herbicides, plasticulture, or fumigation, all are expensive and all have some drawbacks. Many growers use combinations of the practices listed.

Integrated Pest Management (IPM) is a great idea. Growers need to know and understand the pests that affect their crop and how to control them. But IPM is not for everyone. Insects and diseases are confusing and complicated for many folks. This is not necessarily a bad thing-it creates job security for crop consultants!

Crop consultants can help growers with all of the topics presented here. Certified Crop Advisors and Certified Professional Agronomists have education and work experience that you can rely on. We have passed rigorous testing for certification, submitted references, signed an ethics oath, and must take part in continuing education programs to maintain our certification. A nice benefit of the continuing education process is the network that most of us develop over time with educators, state and federal regulators, and each other. These relationships ultimately are a benefit for the growers that we work with. Now, there's a Good Idea!

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