

After PYO: Mechanical Harvest Aids

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Fairwinds Farm

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Fairwinds Farm is a 60 acre farm located in Bowdoinham Maine. Of those 60 acres, 16 of them are planted with strawberries. Approximately 80% of our strawberry sales are made through PYO. The remaining 20% are sold direct to consumer at Farmers' Markets and to wholesale customers.

To get those berries picked in a timely manner for market and wholesale accounts, we hire 30-40 people to come in daily to pick the strawberries. The majority of pickers are high school students; although a few are adults.

Where do we find the pickers? We recruit our pickers through newspaper ads, facebook, help wanted signs at the local stores and word of mouth. We pay "by the quart" meaning pickers are paid for what they pick...we pay them weekly.

How is the picking crew managed? Two to three of our hourly employees are in charge of the picking crew and making sure the berry orders are filled each day. One is designated the Crew Chief. This person oversees the whole picking crew with the help of one or two assistants. He (or she) is given the list of orders for the day; is in charge of quality control; assigns rows to pickers; accepts payment from wholesale customers; and sends berries to market. The Crew Assistants are constantly in the field with the pickers monitoring the quality of berries being picked; they assist the Crew Chief with loading orders for customers; log flats for pickers as they are picked and assist in anyway needed.

The pickers arrive at 6:00 am; our crew arrives 45 minutes to one hour prior to that to get all supplies set up for the day. They set out the number of flats needed to be picked that day (usually 250-300 flats) so there is no concern with either under picking or over picking. If we are picking in more than one field, they set up supplies in each location.

The pickers are each assigned one side of a row; and they pick directly into 8 quart waxed shippers which are already lined with fiber quart containers. The shipper is set into a wooden custom made carrier which has a handle on it. This enables the picker to carrier it easier and also keeps the shipper off the ground. Once the shipper is filled to our specifications, the picker carries it to the truck, where one of the Crew Assistants inspect the berries; marks the picker's initials onto the shipper (for future reference, if needed), records the shipper into the Picker Log, and gives the picker a fresh container so they can go directly back to their assigned aisle to continue picking.

Where do the berries go once they are picked? They go to either one of three places:

1. Into our delivery van to be sent directly to the Farmers' Market.
2. Onto our truck to be held until the customer arrives to pick them up.
3. Onto our truck to be delivered to our cooler for a later pick up or to be frozen for winter sales.

Our goal is to sell fresh berries the same day they are picked...berries are continually being delivered to the market, often within ½ hour of being picked.

How do we know how many berries to pick? We determine how many berries to pick for our Farmers' Market based on past market history (the day of the week, etc); the weather; the time of the season (early on or later in season).

The wholesale customers call us the night before and leave a message with their order.

We also determine any extras we may want to pick to freeze to sell at our winter market.

When things go wrong...how we try to be prepared. We constantly monitor the weather. If rain is predicted for early morning, we will have some of the picking crew come in the evening before and pick some berries to give us a head start on the next day, so we can have a delayed start. If it is predicted to be a complete washout, we will pick some berries the night before, if we are having a market the next day, and will cancel the wholesale orders.

We use waxed carriers (shippers) as they hold up to light rain and heavy dew better. The shippers are loaded directly onto a truck to keep them dry; we give extra dry quart containers to the customers so they can transfer damp berries to them, if needed.

We adjust numbers if the berry picking is going slow...either because there are not enough berries to be picked, or not enough pickers show up.

We plan ahead. If we anticipate that we may need to move from one field to another during the morning pick...we begin the transition prior to actually moving the pickers...so everything is in place, and very little picking time gets lost.

What happens when the pickers are gone for the day? The Crew Chief walks the fields with one of us and we make a determination of where we will have the pickers working the next day. We reevaluate the current day and see where we can make changes or improvements.

When does the season start and end? Our goal is to extend our market season on both ends of the PYO season by planting early and late varieties. We start taking our field berries to market about one week to ten days prior to opening the fields to the public (about Mid June) and will continue at least two weeks after we close the fields to the public (late July). (We have some berries in a hoop house that we begin picking in Mid May for market sales only). We start picking for wholesale customers about three days prior to opening to the public and will offer wholesale as long as we have an abundance of berries available...usually about two weeks.

Keys to success:

1. Operational Agility. Having the ability to adapt quickly to unanticipated changes; such as an unexpected order called in Mid-Morning; unexpected rain shower; unanticipated demand at the market.
2. Communication. Constant communication must take place in order for the process to be successful. We are in continuous contact with our Crew Chief and our Farmers' Market Crew. The Crew Chief stays in continuous contact with his crew via portable radio communication.
3. Fresh....top quality product. Delivering the berries continuously to market right after they are picked is a strong selling point and earns us many repeat customers.
4. All of this takes place in a window of 4-5 hours, six days per week....so having a plan, and being prepared is a necessity.