



Hoke County strawberries, ready for picking



Dead berry

The recent freeze took a toll on local fruits and vegetables. Here the small black center in this bloom indicates a dead strawberry. Despite freeze protection with water, Barnes lost a few berries to the cold.



Abundant crop

This strawberry plant is loaded with berries and will be ready for picking soon. Featherstone believes the use of black plastic has helped improve the yield of the crop. The plastic also warms the soil and aids in bringing in the crop early.

Over 300 years ago, Sir Izaak Walton said of strawberries: "Doubtless God could have made a better berry, but doubtless God never did."

Today, some local growers with help from the Hoke County Extension Service and N.C. State University believe they have come up with a better, earlier maturing version of Walton's strawberry.

By using black plastic, and a lot of planting preparation, Kenneth and Paul Barnes are already harvesting large sweet strawberries from their one-acre Rockfish patch.

A "Pick-Your-Own" operation started on the plot this week, which is about two weeks ahead of growers who have used the conventional method of planting, Extension Service Chairman Willie Featherstone said.

In addition, the plastic method of planting should give the Barnes a high yield of berries.

By using the plastic, over 24,000 plants are developing berries, rather than the normal 8,000 plants, Kenneth Barnes said.

"This year is our first year. It's an experiment," he added.

This year the Barnes planted Early Bells and Sequoia. Both are now bearing fruit.

Another Hoke County grower, Larry Brasier, planted his Sequoias in the conventional method and probably will not harvest strawberries for another month.

Brasier also operates a Pick-Your-Own business in the Rockfish area and will have berries when the Barnes crop has run out.

The plants on the Brasier plot were put in mounded rows last spring. He will get his first crop this year and another next season before the plants are plowed under.

Barnes will remove his plastic and plow his plants under following this year's harvest.

"That's one of the disadvantages of planting on plastic," Featherstone said.

However, it is hoped the yield from this year's plants will make up for higher labor involved in planting and for the loss of the normally perennial plants.

Barnes will have over \$2,000 and a great deal of labor invested in the strawberry patch by the end of the season.

According to N.C. State, the lowest recorded yield from a patch planted on plastic is 8,000 pounds per acre. The highest recorded yield is 22,000 pounds.

Barnes is selling his berries for 60 cents per pound.

"If we get 8,000 pounds, we will come out," Kenneth Barnes said.

The fast ripening strawberries being grown by the Barnes are not shipping berries, because they will bruise too easily.

Although he hopes to get greater dollars per acre in return for his crop than from growing tobacco, the berries are not right for shipping, and Barnes does not see the venture as the answer to local farming woes.

"It will outstrip tobacco, but we're not going to get rich," Kenneth said.



Checking freeze damage

Kenneth Barnes (left) and Extension Agent Willie Featherstone check plant blooms for freeze damage. The crop was not hit hard by recent sub-freezing temperatures because water was sprayed on the plants for protection. Barnes is hoping for a high yield from the acre of strawberries planted on black plastic. The plants are ready for picking now, and the Rockfish patch is open for Pick-Your-Own harvesters.



Ripe in a month

Larry Brasier looks over his strawberry patch, which should have ripe berries within a month. Brasier has planted the crop using the conventional method. Annual yields may not be as high as those planted on plastic, but the plants are good for more than one season.