

Dry, Humid Weather Helps County's Strawberry Crop

BY TERRY POPE

What do red, juicy strawberries have in common with dark, ugly forest fires? They both thrive on dry, humid spring weather.

"Surprisingly, if you could custom

order weather for strawberries, you'd want a dry, humid spring," said Barclay Poling, small fruits specialist with the N.C. State University Agriculture Extension Service. "It's like the old saying, 'One man's

disaster is another man's fortune.'"

Unfortunately, dry and humid springs also create hazardous conditions for forest fires, which has been the case in Brunswick County the past several months. More than 1,800 acres of woodland have burned since the fires began breaking out in mid-March, while strawberries have been ripening in the fields.

Poling toured the county's strawberry farms last week with Brunswick County Agriculture Extension Agent Billy Barrow Jr., and liked what he saw. Brunswick County was the first county in the state that began picking strawberries by mid-April.

"This is one of the prettiest plantings around," Poling said while touring one county farm. Strawberries will not ripen in the piedmont and mountain regions of the state until mid-May, which gives Brunswick County an advantage in the market.

However, keeping the advantage wasn't as easy as it may seem to the average buyer or strawberry lover. Most strawberry farmers suffered anywhere from a 50 to 75 percent reduction in their crops due to January's bitter cold spell, Poling said, when the temperatures dipped down to below zero in most sections of the state.

Late frosts, after the berries had already formed on the plants, also kept Brunswick County's farmers up throughout the night in late March or early April on six or eight occasions, Poling said. If the temperature dips below freezing, strawberry farmers spray water on their crops to freeze the fruit, to keep it from dying.

Although dry, humid days help the plants grow, the cool, spring nights keep the berries juicy and sweet, Poling said. Strawberry plants need a good combination of both weather conditions and access to a good irrigation system for watering, a process some farms in the state lack, he added.

In Brunswick County, there are at least four strawberry farms that provide pick-your-own services and eight roadside markets that sell fresh, locally-grown strawberries. They are listed in a booklet that Barrow compiled, "Roadside Market and Pick-Your-Own Directory," that is free from the Brunswick County Agricultural Extension Office by calling or writing, P.O. Box 1098, Bolivia, N.C., 28422.

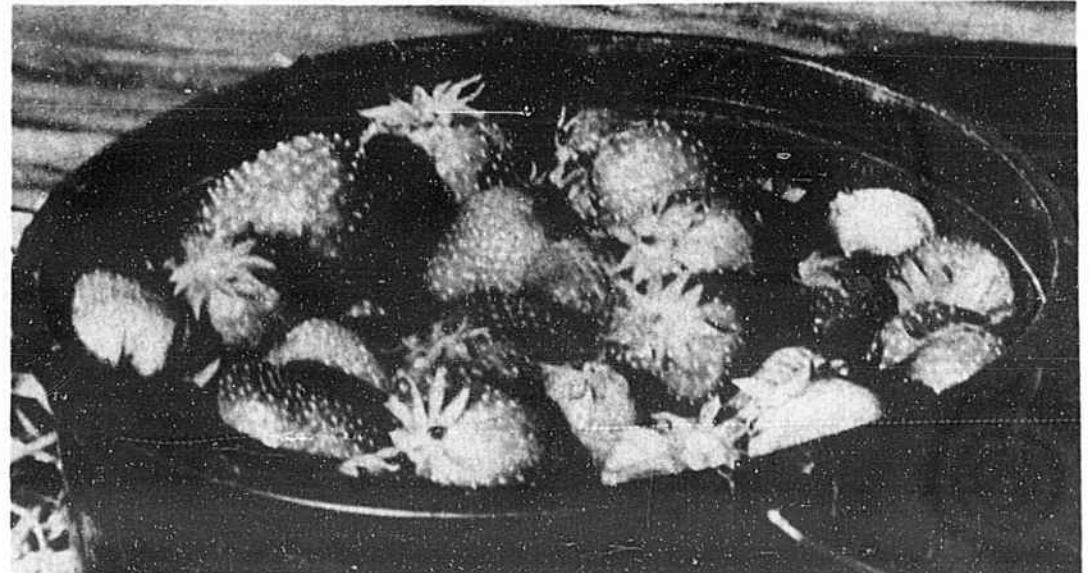
"Most farmers that grow strawberries in Brunswick County are also interested in other crops," Barrow said. "It's another way farmers have diversified to replace tobacco crops."

Farmers who plant strawberries in the fall can have a good alternative crop that can bring in some extra income in the early spring, six or seven months later, he added.



STAFF PHOTOS BY TERRY POPE

DARLENE SKIPPER, top right, and Judy Simmons, both of Hickman's Crossroads, pick their own strawberries from a local field.



STRAWBERRIES are plentiful in Brunswick County humid spring days and cool nights produce excellent strawberries.

Azaleas Need Special Care

Before azaleas can show their true beauty, they need special care such as fertilization and pruning from now until July, said Billy Barrow, assistant Brunswick County Agricultural Extension agent.

Azaleas grow best with a moderate and even level of fertility, Barrow said. There are several special azalea fertilizers available that do an excellent job when used at recommended levels, because the nutrients are released slowly.

Most homeowners can get satisfactory results by using an 8-8-8 or 10-10-10 fertilizer, but should avoid over fertilization, which can cause damage. Split applications during the months of March, May and July is recommended, Barrow said.

Small plants, less than 12 inches tall, should receive one teaspoonful per application. Larger plants should receive a tablespoon of fertilizer per foot in height. For large bed areas, apply 2-3 pints per 100 square foot in a broadcast application, Barrow recommends.

Soil testing may be necessary to determine the correct pH level, which should be somewhere around 5.5-5. For information on soil sampling contact the county agricultural extension office.

"Contrary to popular opinion,

many azaleas do need pruning," Barrow said. Proper pruning can produce a more handsome and compact plant. Heavy pruning should be done immediately following the planting period.

"This surprises many people," Barrow said, "but during the late summer and fall, azaleas produce the new growth that blooms the

following spring."

Tall larger limbs that appear in the top of the plant should be removed down inside the body of the plant. Always remove any dead or injured branches when shaping or heading back azaleas.

Pruning in November will destroy a majority of the blooms for next season.

SPECIAL OF THE WEEK

Save 20% ON MOTHERS RINGS

REMEMBER MOTHERS DAY IS MAY 12



Tripp's Jewelry

MAIN ST., SHALLOTTE, 754-6807 SHOP WEEKLY SPECIALS WITH CASH, CHECK OR BANK CARDS



COASTAL WALLPAPER & CARPET

Main Street Shallotte
754-6965 754-8049

"We're Setting Trends For Others To Follow"

★ Carpet ★ Vinyl
★ Wallpaper ★ Vertical & Mini Blinds

Commercial & Residential Professional Installation

Harrelson's Farm Center

Hwy. 17, 1 Mile South of Shallotte
754-6373

We're the Growing EXPERTS

Complete line of Garden Tools
Hanging Baskets Feed & Seed
Bedding Plants Fertilizer
Potted Plants Azaleas



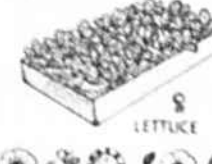
AZALEA



PEPPER



TOMATO



LETTUCE

We carry a full line of pest control products. We are qualified to assist you in your lawn & garden pest control needs.

Mother's Day May 12

Flower Gifts



ROSE BUSHES

EVINRUDE

Summer's Coming. Get Your New Boat Today.



We have a full line of Cox Trailers



Get the new boating season off to a great start at GORE HARDWARE, SERVISTAR AND MARINE CENTER, your Evinrude Motors dealer. We have a complete selection of great new boats by Performance, Starline, Glasstream, Lowe, Starcraft, Landau and Carolina, as well as the full line of Evinrude outboards. Also see us for Evinrude electric trolling motors.

We have great deals on all the new boating accessories, too. And easy finance terms to get you out on the water that first warm day of the season. Stop in at your Evinrude boating headquarters now.



Also, see us for all your fishing and skiing needs.



Name brands you know at prices you'll love.

GORE HARDWARE, SERVISTAR AND MARINE CENTER

HWY. 130

WHITEVILLE Mon.-Sat. 6:00 AM-7:00 PM

642-4464 or 642-4588