

Division of Marketing
Agricultural Development and Diversification (ADD) Program
1995 Grant Final Report

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Culture (Phase 1)

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EARLY SEASON STRAWBERRY PRODUCTION UTILIZING PLASTIC COVERED
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The first season of this project has been, to say the least, a learning experience. Not only was this the first time that we grew a crop inside of a greenhouse structure, but we were also growing the plants utilizing a new cultural technique developed in North Carolina, which is now being adapted in many other parts of the country, that is radically different from the conventional matted row system of cultivation that we normally use to grow strawberries.

We were extremely pleased with the results from the first year of the study. We began with the assumption that this system would produce a crop several weeks earlier than the normal field grown strawberries, and that this fruit could then be marketed at a premium price. The results were better than expected on both counts.

The first harvest of the greenhouse grown strawberries was on May 17, We began picking field grown strawberries at our farm this year on June 27. The berries were marketed at the Dane County Farmers Market in Madison. There was very little consumer resistance to a price of \$2.50 per pint. \$2.50 per quart is probably a good average price on this market during the main season, so the early fruit sold for double price. It's possible that these berries could have commanded an even higher price, but we began the season selling for \$2.00 and we were reluctant to raise the price too much because of public relations considerations.

The quality of the fruit was excellent, and although pesticide reduction was not our primary goal, we were able to produce this years crop without insecticides or fungicides. Another bonus was that the greenhouses allowed a timely harvest during an extremely rainy spring that would have completely devastated strawberries in the open field.

The downside of this first years results is that the yield was disappointing. With a population of approximately 2400 plants, we were only able to produce 790 pints of berries this season. We had hoped for at least one pint per plant.

In discussing this project with researchers who are working with the North Carolina system, the yield problem apparently stems from planting too late in the fall of 95. For optimum yields, fall

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planted strawberry plants need 5-7 branch crowns, our plants typically had 2. The number of branch crowns is determined by the amount of growth that the plant puts on during the short days of fall, our plants simply weren't planted early enough in the fall to produce a full crop.

During the second year of this study we have a much better idea of a target date for fall planting. We plan to stagger several plantings around this target date in order to determine the optimum planting time under our conditions, since planting too early can result in too many branch crowns, with a corresponding drop in yield and fruit quality.

Growers from other states using the North Carolina system in the open field are reporting yields in the range of one and a half pints per plant. There is no reason that we shouldn't do as well here in Wisconsin inside the greenhouse tunnels, once we determine the correct planting date. with plant populations of 2500 or more and a minimum price of 2.50 per pint, we would hope that the economic results of the second year of the study will be as promising as the horticultural results have been this first year.