

Strawberries are berry, berry early



Frank Varga / Skagit Valley Herald

Farmer Don Kruse said this year's crop of strawberries will be ready for harvest soon, about three weeks earlier than usual.

Warm weather gives crop a boost

Growers say harvest to begin three weeks earlier than usual

By KASIA PIERZGA
Staff Writer

Thanks to unseasonably warm temperatures and plenty of sunshine, Skagit Valley's strawberry crop is almost ready for picking — about three weeks ahead of schedule.

In a strawberry field just west of Best Road near La Conner, farmer Don Kruse said this year's berry crop could be the earliest he's ever seen. With so many berries ripe for the picking, he's ready to open his farm stand on Highway 20 west of Burlington by this weekend.

"I'm having a hard time getting my mind wrapped around the fact that we're going to be picking strawberries this early," he said. "I'm kind of in a state of denial."

The scene is the same all around the area: bushy green foliage laden with mounds of ripening berries.

At Sakuma Brothers Farm near Bow, Richard Sakuma says he's aiming to open his direct-market farm stand by June 1.

"A lot depends on the weather," he said. "It could cool off and really delay everything."

Sakuma said he expects his spring harvest of berries will last into mid-July, with seven different varieties of strawberries ripening one after another. He also maintains a crop of everbearing plants, which will produce berries again in August and September.

Strawberries are an important crop for Skagit County, according to Washington State University extension agent Dyvon Havens. In 2001, local farmers harvested 7 tons of strawberries, valued



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At \$3 million. As much as 90 percent of the crop goes to Sakuma or other berry processors.

Although only an inch of rain has fallen since March, farmer Don Kruse said he probably won't invest a lot of time irrigating his strawberry crop because there's probably enough moisture in the soil to keep the plants productive.

While the recent warm temperatures have helped to speed up ripening, the lack of rain has been a concern for many farmers. According to measurements taken at the local agricultural research station, only an inch of rain has fallen since the end of March. Normal April

rainfall is about 2.5 inches. Sakuma has been using a drip irrigation system to keep the farm's 180 acres of berry plants watered. Most smaller operations are hoping there's enough moisture in the fields to keep the berry plants healthy and productive. While the plants need rain, too much at the

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See BERRIES, Page A10

Berries: Early arrival causes difficulties to overcome

Continued from Page A1

wrong time can hurt the harvest. Rain that falls on ripe, red strawberries can cause the fruit to mold.

Strawberry fans will no doubt welcome the news of their favorite fruit's early arrival this year, but Kruse said harvesting in May presents some challenges.

Some of the migrant workers that farmers depend on to bring in the crop are still harvesting asparagus in Eastern Washington. And migrants whose children are still in school in California or Oregon might not be ready yet to head north to Skagit County, he said.

Finding a market for the berries might be tough too. Many of Kruse's regular fresh-market customers might not think of stopping by his Skagit Sun farm stand until June, when the strawberries usually arrive. And with high school students still in classes through the first week of June, finding people to staff his stands will be a problem, too.

Still, Kruse said he's pleased with the quantity and quality of his crop.

"The good news is that people will be able to have strawberry shortcake on Memorial Day," he said with a laugh.

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