

# Skagit Valley Herald

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## Berry season opens today

*Early indicators point to a good strawberry season*

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Staff Writer

Don Kruse is among Skagit Valley growers opening their stands today, which is earlier than usual thanks to the weather and advances in horticultural science.

"The yield looks good. And if this weather continues, it should be a good strawberry year," he said.

Skagit County is renowned for its June-ripening berries.

"They are extra juicy, have a better flavor and are sweeter," he said.

He speaks fondly of traditional varieties that bear grand old Northwest names: Shuksan, Rainier, Totem and Hood. And he is equally proud of the newer varieties: honeyoye, which are ripe now, and Puget summer, which will ripen later in the summer.

Growers are increasing the amount of



**Honeyoye strawberries** are ripe now.

marketing they do directly from the farm to consumers and are always looking for ways to extend harvest time. It's all about raising the odds of turning a profit on the roulette wheel that is crop production.

"It's what you have to do to survive," said Richard Sakuma, president of farming operations for Sakuma Brothers Farms.

Kruse has been selling strawberries at one of his stands, five miles west of Burlington, for the past 25 years. He started with five acres of strawberries after purchasing a farm outside La Conner. He now grows strawberries, raspberries and blueberries on 100 acres of leased and owned land and markets under his own Skagit Sun label.

The Sakuma family has grown berries in the Skagit Valley since 1939. The Sakumas not only grow and sell berries, they have just opened a plant in Burlington where they can individually quick-freeze fresh fruit. The Sakumas also operate a nursery in California that specializes in berry plants.

Steve Sakuma, one of the owners of Sakuma Brothers Farms, said June berries are typically a 21- to 31-day harvest. These days, growers try to extend the season with early and late bearers and ever-bearing berry plants.

About the middle of the month, the quick-freeze plant will be in full swing. Today Sakuma's stand will offer both honeyoye and the first of the ever-bearing strawberries, which are mostly grown just for fresh eating.

Why should consumers be discerning about the variety of berries they buy?

Kruse said ever-bearing strawberries, particularly those from California, lack the quality of the June varieties — although he hastens to add that ever-bearing berries do hold a key place in the market.

"The season is longer. They have better shelf life and have nice eye appeal," he said.

Richard Sakuma generally agrees with Kruse, but with one major difference. When ever-bearers are grown locally, the quality improves. They are juicier and sweeter due to the benefits of the Northwest climate and local soil conditions, he said.

Kruse said comparing strawberries is the same as selecting varietal wines. There are types of strawberries to suit different tastes and purposes.

Both growers say educating the public about the finer qualities of locally grown produce will foster interest and promote the success of the crops.

And they are thankful the weather is cooperating as the harvest begins.

The strawberries are earlier this year because there was no late frost, so the beginning of harvesting is about a week or so ahead.

"This stretch of weather is just right to sweeten up the berries," Richard Sakuma said.

Sweeter is better when marketing.

"It's like all those ads you see promoting Copper River salmon," he said. "You could insert local strawberries instead of salmon."



**Don Kruse of La Conner** savors the first of the strawberries he will sell as he opens his stands today in Anacortes, on Highway 20 west of Burlington and in Conway.