

Region's strawberry crop gets a jump on summer

Some wonder if global warming brought on harvest

BY HSIAO-CHING CHOU
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The strawberries just won't wait any longer.

In valleys up and down the Puget Sound area, strawberry farmers have been gearing up to harvest the local gems two to three weeks ahead of schedule. Weather is unpredictable

from day to day, month to month, year to year. But, three weeks early is about as early as it gets.

Don Kruse, owner of Skagit Sun, which specializes in growing heirloom varieties of strawberries, said he hasn't started a harvest so soon in the season in the 25 years he's been farming. Until now, harvesting by Memorial Day was a record for him, and that was a decade ago.

"We generally don't pick until mid-June," said Kruse, whose fields are located in the flats of the Skagit Valley between La Conner and Mount

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FROM A1

Vernon.

The warm temperatures during the day and the lack of rain have sped up the ripening process of strawberries, as well as other crops.

Washington asparagus hit the markets early, as will local cherries, which are about a week ahead of schedule. Some cherry varieties will be in stores at the beginning of next month.

Of all the early arrivals, the timing change of strawberries has been the most drastic. In fact, they showed up at last weekend's farmers market in West Seattle.

No one wants to speculate whether global warming is the cause of this unusual spring. State climatologist Philip Mote explained that the mild temperatures are "consistent with the overall, long-term trend toward warmer weather. But, it sticks out like a sore thumb."

What's more worrisome, Mote said, is that for the past three months, the region has had half the normal precipitation.

Kruse's pickers made their first trip into the fields Saturday. The first batch went to Skagit Sun stands in the valley; deliveries to his Seattle customers - Whole Foods and Metropolitan Markets - will start today or tomorrow.

Gary Remlinger, who owns Remlinger Farms in Carnation, said his harvest will begin around May 29, which is the earliest in at least two decades.

"It looks like it'll be the nicest crop in years," said Remlinger, who has been farming berries for 40 of his 58 years. "It's one of the nicest springs I've seen in years, too."

Consumers may be excited by the prospect of tasting summer in spring, but it's not all shortcake when the weather pushes the boundaries.

Tom Schotzko, an agricultural economist with Washington State University, said it's highly unusual for the season to be this early.

One of the major concerns for growers is that, if the warm weather continues without any break in temperatures, the harvest will be compressed by the fruit maturing all at once instead of gradually.

"Prices will start out high, but as volume increases in the middle of the season, (farmers) will suffer," Schotzko said. Retailers can lose out, too, if there's a glut of a particular crop. Consumers can support only so much produce at any one time, so



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Don Kruse, at his strawberry farm last week, had pickers out Saturday. He said he is concerned about having enough labor to harvest the early crop.

surplus goes to waste.

Also, the demand for labor demand may exceed supply.

Kruse and other Washington farmers fear that migrant workers either aren't through with harvests in California or haven't heard that the season here has jumped into full swing.

"Within a week, we'll know about the labor situation," Kruse said. It also doesn't help that the high-schoolers he usually relies on to tend his stands haven't finished the academic year.

Retailers also have to scramble to accommodate the early arrival of "star" produce. Advertising and in-store promotions are scheduled in advance. Metropolitan Markets, for example, has had to rush to reconfigure its plans for the next several weeks. And when the star is the local strawberry, the stress on retailer can be high.

The strawberries that Kruse and many other local farmers grow are heirloom varieties or hybrids of heirlooms, which are not to be confused with the "day-neutral" varieties that are bred for shelf life.

Old-fashioned types of berries

are grown for their deep, red color and succulent flavor. However, if they are not picked, packed, sold and on the consumer's table within 24 hours, the berries turn to mush. And rotting berries don't sell. The day-neutral varieties, which with which some farmers are experimenting in the Puget Sound area, are the so-called California-type berries, which have stamina but not as much flavor.

Much of the local strawberry crop goes to processors, such as Haagen-Dazs, for ice cream. Cheaper fruit from Mexico and China, though, may lure away what few processors remain in the state, especially in the Skagit Valley.

Farmer/advocates such as Kruse, who is one of the co-founders of Skagitians to Preserve Farmland, a preservation and land-trust organization, want to protect the future of local berry farms by promoting heirloom varieties and bringing a larger quantity to the fresh market.

"My intent is to stick with the old varieties," Kruse said.

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