

Strawberry fields ripe for the picking

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Reporting thoughts from matted row system. Credit: Matthew Stevens

Many fruit farmers in the United States rely heavily on "pick-your-own" (PYO) operations to realize profits and create repeat business. Pick-your-own fruit farms are an important market segment, and consumer satisfaction with the experience is critical to farmers eager to increase seasonal revenues.

A team of researchers from the University of Maryland, Utah State University, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture compared three different strawberry production systems over a two-year period (2003-2004) to determine which system was preferred by consumers who frequented pick-your-own farms. Researchers also examined each production system to compare the quality of strawberries produced and attempted to determine how consumer preference affected the price

customers would pay for fresh berries.

Matthew Stevens, a graduate student at the University of Maryland, undertook the research project as part of his Master's thesis. Stevens reported that consumers surveyed in the first year of his study preferred picking fruit from the cold-climate "plasticulture" system. Plasticulture strawberries are grown on raised beds using black plastic mulch and a trickle irrigation system.

Farmers use plasticulture because it can extend the growing season and improve crop health and growth. Interestingly, Stevens' team found that consumers surveyed during the second year of the study preferred PYO strawberries grown in the "advanced matted row" system, which features raised beds covered with a cover crop mulch instead of plastic mulch and a subsurface drip irrigation system.

"This seems to suggest that the cold-climate plasticulture system, typically an annual production system, is not ideal for perennial production, but would be popular as an annual system. The conventional matted row system, most commonly used in colder production regions, was the least popular system in the first year and was ranked between the advanced matted row and cold-climate plasticulture system in the second year. Most consumers (63%) indicated they would be willing to pay more to pick fruit from their favorite system.", Stevens stated. "We also found that, among fruit quality characteristics tested, only firmness differed among the systems, with fruit from the cold-climate plasticulture being slightly softer than fruit from the other two systems."

According to Stevens, the research study will provide growers with a clear comparison of how different strawberry production systems affect customers' perceptions of pick-your-own experiences. "As growers consider shifting from the conventional matted row system to modern systems, this research will give them an idea of how customers may react

to such a change. Growers can use this information, along with information on economics and environmental impacts of the systems, to make an informed decision on which system would be best to use on their farm.", he summarized.

Source: American Society for Horticultural Science

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