

Organic Strawberry Production at Mountindale Farm

Prepared for the 2009 Organic Small Fruit Workshop in Memramcook

Before any one starts to plant strawberries in organic production a few things should be considered. First where and how am I going to market the berries and what method will be used for harvest. Secondly is the ground ready for strawberries, having the nutrients necessary and being as free of weeds, especially grass, as possible. Are the tools needed to plant, cultivate and mulch available. The last consideration should be how much to plant. These factors all contribute to successful organic farming and the right decisions made at the onset will have much to do with the success of the organic berry grower.

The following is a synopsis of organic strawberry production at Mountindale Farm. It should be stressed at the onset that this is our method of growing strawberries and should not be considered to be an authoritative summary; but just what works for us and it will probably be modified as time goes on.

We try to make sure that we have as much sod as possible out of the field before planting berries. This usually takes a couple of years and involves growing some row crop before the berries. The year before planting we plow in the spring and apply lime. We then apply a heavy coat of compost. The ground is allowed to sprout a crop of weeds and then harrowed on a warm day with a vibrashank and left to dry out, this may be repeated. At the end of May we plant buckwheat at twice the recommended rate as a green manure and cover crop. When the buckwheat is in flower the plot is mowed with a bush cutter and then plowed. We harrow when we see weeds starting and then towards the end of August a cover crop of oats is planted. This should give cover for the winter.

The following spring apply compost again and we plow in the oats and harrow with a vibrashank to kill as much couch/quack grass as possible. We usually plant in early May and use a single row planter using 18 inch spacing and 5 feet on center rows. Cultivation is carried on each week after the first two weeks and a blind harrowing takes place at approximately 3 weeks. After that it is weekly if possible; mechanical weeding is most effective when weeds are small. The blossoms are picked when they appear and runners are moved into the rows with the cultivation, to do this we go the same direction on each row each pass. Hand weeding will still be necessary and the first year weed control is vital as after that it gets very hard to control weeds.

As we only u-pick we try to improve the appearance of the patch by taking off the rear wheel of a bush cutter and skimming over the patch at the level of the strawberry plants. Last year we also used a commercial weed whacker to mow weed between the rows. This also helps the pickers find berries and does clean up a patch remarkably.

After the berries are finished we have three patches of berries. The ones planted that year, ones bearing the first year and the patch having been picked two years. The later is plowed under. The first year patch is now ready for renovation which is different from conventional strawberry methods. We mow again just to remove the weeds and barely touch the strawberry plants. The reason for this is to keep a thick canopy of berry plants and thus keep weeds down. We then go through with single shank cultivators trying to bury as much straw as possible. Some will be present at the row ends and this is removed after the renovation is finished. Cultivator shanks are added until the rows have good separation again. The row width is still probably kept at 16-18 inches. We do top dress with organic fertilizer at the rate of one ton/1.5 acres. The same rate is applied to the first year patch. We keep cultivating until Oct.

The plants are covered with straw in late Nov or early Dec. We use 250 -300 small square bales per acre. We do not skimp on straw as it protects the berries and is nice for the u pick folks. As well you have to be diligent to keep deer and other pest out of your crop. We do monitor for clipper weevil which as yet has not been a problem; but will probably show up some year. Experiment with varieties as different ones work well on some types of ground and poorly on others.