

Growing strawberries . . . as a 'beginner'

I feel like a beginner again growing strawberries from scratch. We did it decades ago, but have not done so since 1993, so I will give you something of the history before I get to the present.

Small beginnings

As a kid I grew a few strawberries in our tiny back garden in Bristol, with a couple of plants from a neighbour. I was entranced by the way that the plants seemed to be able to re-produce themselves so readily, taking over vast areas of our soggy clay mixed with fire-cinders soil. I never really got to grow much fruit though, with birds, slugs together with my impatience at having to wait for what seemed like an eternity to see any red fruit. But I was hooked, strawberries were a fascination, but then I became a teenager and the juicy berry was forgotten for a while. I had a few summers picking strawberries at Cheddar, famous for its caves, cheese and strawberries for which I earned a reasonable wage. But the best part of the work was that I learnt how to pick strawberries properly and see how the commercial growers managed the crop.

In those heady days of the sixties, strawberry growers at Cheddar were small by today's standards, the one I worked for, Reggie Lukens, had only seven acres, and that kept him and his family in a decent living. They also grew a few early spuds for market and the rotation was spuds and strawbs. Chemical usage was probably very high, and it was during my work there that I started to think about such unnatural methods of food growing and wondering if there was another way of producing food.

Those growers were starting to see a decline in yields affected by eelworm and other nasty soil inhabitants, so more and more chemicals were used, with the 'green revolution' of the sixties promising total control of weeds, pest and diseases. But the reduction in yields, the axing of the local train service and increased foreign competition sounded the death knell to these local growers. Today most are gone, only a few managed to stay in business, capitalising on niche markets. For anybody contemplating a business of only growing strawberries it will need a vast amount of capital and large area of land to make commercial reality work.

Today the bulk of strawberry crops are grown in Spanish tunnels using the tabletop method, relying on nutrient film technique similar to tomato production, yields are high, chemicals are the main input resulting in tasteless, turnip style fruits. This suits the demands of the supermarkets telling us that this is what the customer wants. Why would any customer demand long shelf life and a colour that only looks good under certain lights? This method of growing has a big impact on the environment, with acres of plastic stretching away into the distance, masses of water run-off from the roofs and almost as many acres of caravans to house the army of pickers that rummage daily through the crop for months on end.



Tolly picking strawberries in 1983

Photo: Tolhurst Organic Produce

Business is a runner

But, to get back to the history - in 1976, the year of the great drought, I was working as a herdsman on a large dairy farm, and I planted my first commercial crop of strawberries, 500 Cambridge Vigour, into a piece of poor, sandy land. Despite the odds, a crop was produced and we sold the lot in three weeks at the roadside, marking every punnet with "Grown organically without chemicals". We applied for the Soil Association Symbol, and a larger planting the next season had us running around the area to sell the crop, the realities of marketing suddenly kicking in. The growing is relatively simple, the hard bit is flogging the resultant crop at a reasonable return - not much change there then!

Over the following season we moved to a larger and even more derelict piece of north facing land at 800 feet in Cornwall. The land was about as bad as it gets, Grade 4 with a pH of 4.5, no phosphate and a massive herd of hungry wireworms ready to pounce on my enthusiastic naivety. Despite the initial setbacks, the strawberries did reasonably well and we ended up with over two acres for fruit and even more as a separate venture producing plants to sell to other growers. We were the first ever plant producers registered with the Plant Health Propagation Scheme, monitored by ADAS inspectors who were convinced that we would fall prey to aphids, red spider mite and a host of other nasties, ending our crazy idealistic dreaming. I actually received a call from ADAS at Starcross in Exeter who tried to convince me that the venture was a complete waste of time and that we could well be jeopardising other growers' crops with our chemical free methods, but this just made me even more determined to go ahead. On our first plant inspection we had five ADAS officers turn up with their sterilised wellies and hand lenses desperately trying to find aphids, red spider and any other non-allowed pest.

They got through the day without finding anything more than one aphid and a host of ladybird larvae and they asked where we had got them from! Following that, the ADAS team became very friendly and quite supportive of what we were doing, even becoming good allies. One of them even became the local ADAS organic 'expert'.

Move to Hardwick

The move to Hardwick saw an expansion of the strawberry business and we had some good years of excellent crops during the late 80s and early 90s. By this time we had developed a long rotation with vegetables and green manures had become the main fertility builder. We moved to a new field at Hardwick on which to grow strawberry plants, a nice south facing piece of grassland, with water close by and easy access. Our rotation settled down to strawberries for plants one year, followed by spuds then several years of vegetables interspersed with green manures. I had always maintained at least six years between strawberry crops as there is a high risk of soil borne diseases that can cause havoc, strawberries are highly bred and succumb to disease very easily. We continued to grow strawberries for fruit within the walled garden rotation and by now we had a good business supplying fruit to local outlets, the fruit being easy to sell and the local market suited us well. Just one shop alone in the village would take over 200kg for a weekend and of course, Wimbledon was our best time and if the sun shone it was perfect for sales.

Of course as we all know, the sun does not always shine although I seem to recall that summers were previously more reliable. Wet periods cause big problems as botrytis is inevitable with strawberries and we got used to occasionally losing entire crops, but as soon as the weather improved the remainder of the crop would often pick up. We got used to these losses, accepting them as the lot of the organic grower and we manipulated the crop with different techniques and varieties to try and dodge the worst of the losses, so we never lost more than a percentage of the yield.

The plant business was going well too, with a good customer base and we had branched out into mail order to gardeners, which was much more lucrative than supplying commercial growers who always wanted a lot of plants for little money; we were unable to get away with charging organic premiums. At that time, we were producing over a quarter of a million plants each year between September and March and it was keeping a lot of people in casual work at the time. The whole thing was very sociable, with a lot of people, all on piece-work, chatting away and generally having a good day out in the fields.

Disaster strikes!

Then, just when we thought that all was well with the world of growing, disaster struck. The new field was planted up in 1993; the plant crop grew well and passed its first PHPS inspection in June. In order to qualify, we were not allowed to let the plants fruit so all flowers were picked off in June; this also helped the production of more runners which was what we needed.

But, by the end of July I was horrified to see all 9,000 plants looking sick and suspected Verticillium wilt (V wilt). A phone call to ADAS produced my local plant health inspector within hours and the worst was confirmed subject to plant analysis. The crop was condemned and was ploughed in. This was a heavy blow, just as we thought we were just getting used to dealing with regular disasters. We had to lay off all our staff and close down the plant business. As it was our main source of income we were going to have to think hard to get out of this one!

Soil analysis by ADAS confirmed that all the land around us here was heavily infected with V wilt and unsuitable for strawberry production, but as the test had only just been developed, it would not have been possible to predict this problem. The disease affects a whole range of vegetable crops to a lesser or greater degree, which obviously had implications for our vegetable rotations as well.

I needed to find out more about this disease if I was going to be able to grow vegetables in the long term. The problem goes back to the war years when much of the low lying land at Hardwick was ploughed as part of the Dig for Victory campaign. Then, the Ministry of Food (we need a modern day version of this Ministry now) forced farmers to reduce livestock and increase arable and vegetable production. This campaign was hugely successful and by the end of the war, the population was eating a far better diet that they are today and Britain fed itself almost entirely with home-produced food. The downside of this was that as there was access to irrigation from the river the Hardwick land grew mostly potatoes, and rotation was almost non-existent. As a result the V wilt became well established and also several Solanacea weeds, which carried the disease over. The disease can live for decades without a host but forever when there is one. So we increased the vegetable production to fill the gap left by the strawberries and got into the box scheme which, for us at that time, was like Manna from Heaven, as for once we were able to sell what we produced locally and dictate our terms of business. Prior to that we were in the hands of the buyers, some of whom thought it OK not to pay us for what we had toiled.

Full circle

So, what of the present? We, like other growers, find that the box scheme is now in decline and we have to explore other ways of selling what we grow and it has definitely got harder the last few years. Unfortunately, Joe Public no longer seems to appreciate local, seasonal produce from the farmer. We can sell all we produce, but it is hard work with multiple outlets and complicated systems of delivery to cope with the demands. So we concentrate even more on the local, making sure that everyone in our immediate area knows that we are here. So, we are going back to the one crop I know people fight for, strawberries. It is the most popular summer fruit and the supermarkets love it. But can we beat them at this game? I think we can, as we can grow the varieties that have very limited shelf life, don't like to travel but actually taste and smell like strawberries. The supermarket criteria are all about shelf life and travel ability, varieties are bred solely for that purpose, with the taste leaving much to be desired.



Strawberries at Hardwick - Winter 2013

So I have gone full circle, back to my roots you could say, to the crop that I built my organic reputation on. But I still have the problem of Verticillium wilt to deal with and that is where modern technology comes into play. As I said earlier, I feel like a beginner when it comes to growing strawberries, having to research the latest information on this crop and contemplate how to fit it into my farm rotations and disease pressures. Two decades is quite a long time in terms of growing and the technologies for strawberries have changed quite dramatically in that time. The two major threats of Verticillium wilt and botrytis are now controllable by modern biological controls that have been developed. The improvement of mustard varieties to produce the Caliente mustard is used as a preceding green manure to reduce the levels of Verticillium. This is becoming standard use for commercial strawberry growers who have recently lost methyl bromide and their horrendous use of it to sterilise soils. Of course they think that using Caliente will mean they can continue to grow without any or little rotation, but this will not be the case. And the recently developed biological control Prestop that works by hyper parasitism, which attacks harmful fungi, could mean a dramatic reduction in the losses of botrytis. I have also moved on a bit over time and I now have better rotations, better fertility, lots of fantastic woodchip compost together with another couple of decades of experience, which have added personal resilience.

So this year we produced 2000 new strawberry plants in a nursery bed and have planted them into our land having grown Caliente mustard to reduce the effects of Verticillium wilt. We will be watching the results carefully. Our first crop will be under cloches in May next year followed by a later outdoor crop and have used an old variety that we used to grow a decade ago. Cambridge Favourite has in fact been around for a hundred years and we will have an additional new variety, bred for its high levels of resistance to Verticillium wilt called Christine.

I've not even got onto the actual growing of strawberries part at all, but then I am a beginner again and need to learn through experience. I will let you know how it goes after the maiden crop of next summer.

Iain Tolhurst

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