

WSU Organic Farm
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Strawberries are too delicate to be picked by machine. The perfectly ripe ones even bruise at too heavy a human touch. It hit her then that every strawberry she had ever eaten - every piece of fruit - had been picked by calloused human hands. Every piece of toast with jelly represented someone's knees, someone's aching back and hips, someone with a bandanna on her wrist to wipe away the sweat. Why had no one told her about this before?

- Alison Luterman, "What They Came For," *The SUN Magazine*

I'm glad everyone has been so happy with the strawberries this season. We felt like we were short on berries last season and this spring planted 2 more beds. Each of our beds has two rows of berries 1 1/2 feet apart and one foot between plants. Our beds are 180 feet long. That brings our total to 700 feet of bed space! Wow! So now we have berries for all shares each week and extra to trade or sell. But what really goes into getting those berries to your boxes?

All our berries are the same variety: Tribute. It is an everbearer that produces its main crop from August until hard frost which is usually by the end of October around here. I've gotten so many comments from people asking how we could possibly do this. Well, it's the beauty of an everbearer. Most people are more familiar with early strawberries but these are from June-bearers, a very different creature. The June-bearers put on one early crop and then are done for the season. If you remember, our berries actually put on a short crop back in June and then took a break until August when they got serious about putting on the fruit.

I order live plants from a very well respected family business on the west-side called Sakuma Bros. They produce strawberries, raspberries, and some other fruit plants for many of the big growers and even do some growing themselves. They've recently been growing organic strawberries for Cascadian Farm in enormous hoop houses and apparently are doing very well.

Anyway, the "live" plants come in April in small boxes wrapped in plastic bags and wet sawdust. These are really just the roots or "crowns" and have no green to them at all. The key is for us to be ready to plant these crowns as quickly as we can so they do not dry out. After laying out the beds, we plant by hand, digging a small hole for each crown and

spreading its roots out as much as possible in each hole. It's critical to plant the crown at the correct depth. Soil level should come just about to the start of the roots but not covering the crown which will produce the leaves and shoots. Then all the plants need is water which usually isn't a problem in April but we are sure to have the drip tape set out in case of a dry spell.

As spring progresses so do the weeds. Strawberries are one of the most time consuming plants we grow because they offer almost no weed competition. This means intensive hand cultivation many times during the season. The other chore is keeping runners cut. Each plant tries to send out "runners" in an attempt to establish a daughter plant next to the mother. This is nice but counter-productive.

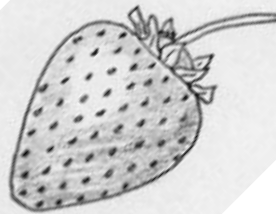
We've already spaced the plants where we want them and would rather they focus their attention on producing the red gold that we're really interested in. We also pick any early flowers off first-year plants to help get the new roots better established.

So if you make it through all these chores you still have to get out there and pick the darn things.

Right now this takes a crew of about 4 people one to two hours! And, yes, every single berry is picked by hand along with every other crop on the farm. Take a minute and think about it. Whether it's 60 pints of strawberries, 100 pounds of potatoes, or 200 ears of corn, there's a lot of pickin' going on out here.

Strawberries produce well for a least two years and if left for a third season will start to decline. When we are ready to take a bed out of production we will till the plants in and then replant in a different spot the next year. These are great plants to have in your home gardens and if you're ambitious you may even get enough to put in the freezer for the winter.

-Brad Jaeckel



CSA shareholder reminder: Please everybody, bring your own bag or box to pick up your veggies each week. The farm has to scrounge these from other sources so it really helps if you bring your own. And please feel free to bring extras to help out those who forget! Thanks!!

The quickest way to eat fresh strawberries (besides plain) is to sprinkle a little sugar on them, crush them a bit with a fork, and pour a little heavy cream or 1/2 and 1/2 on them. But strawberries make spectacular tarts, lovely jam, and dress up any number of things like breakfast cereal, a slice of cake, or a scoop of ice cream. You can make a quick ice cream or waffle syrup by crushing the berries just slightly and cooking them with a little sugar in a saucepan for a few minutes. Mmm. Another good way to enjoy fresh sliced strawberries is added to a little red wine in a glass, which, according to Alice Waters, is how winemakers in France enjoy their first strawberries of the season. If you prefer the taste of almonds with strawberries instead of oranges, substitute Amaretto for the Grand Marnier in the recipe below.

Strawberries Grand Marnier (Serves 3 to 4) from *Simple French Desserts* by Jill O'Connor

3 cups fresh strawberries, hulled and quartered	1/8 cup fresh orange juice
1/8 cup Grand Marnier or other orange liqueur	1 tablespoon superfine sugar

Gently toss all the ingredients together. Refrigerate at least 30 minutes or up to 3 hours before serving (the berries will start to break down after 3 hours and become mushy.) Serve the berries alone, or with whipped cream, over ice cream or sorbet, or alongside sweetened fresh yogurt cheese (fromage blanc).

Fanny's Strawberry-Orange Compote (Serves 4) from *Chez Panisse Fruit* by Alice Waters

2 small navel oranges	1 cup water
1/2 cup plus 2 tablespoons sugar	One 1-pint basket strawberries (about 2 cups)

Remove about three-quarters of the zest from one of the oranges with a zester or peel off strips of zest with a vegetable peeler and cut into a fine julienne. Measure 1/2 cup sugar and the water into a saucepan and bring to a boil to dissolve the sugar. Add the tiny strips of zest, reduce the heat, and simmer for about 30 minutes, until the peel is tender and the syrup has reduced and thickened slightly. Let cool.

Rinse the strawberries and dry them gently. Hull and slice them about 1/4 inch thick into a bowl. Cut away all the peel from the oranges: slice off the tops and bottom and cut away all the rind. Remove skinless sections of oranges by sliding a sharp paring knife alongside the membranes and prying out the segments into the bowl with the strawberries. Squeeze the juice from the orange «carcasses,» sprinkle with 2 tablespoons sugar, and mix gently.

To serve, spoon the compote into serving glasses or dishes, sprinkle some curls of the candied peel on top, and drizzle a teaspoon of the syrup from the peel over the compote.

Beekeeper's Strawberry Jam (6 half-pints) from *The Northwest Essentials Cookbook* by Greg Atkinson

4 cups crushed strawberries	1 3/4 cups mild honey
2 boxes powdered pectin	2 tablespoons lemon juice

Sterilize 6 1/2-pint jars in boiling water and keep them simmering. In a large saucepan, combine the strawberries and pectin. Bring the mixture to a boil. Boil hard for 1 minute, stirring constantly. Add the honey and lemon juice and bring the mixture back to a full, rolling boil. Boil hard for 5 minutes, stirring constantly. Remove from heat, skim off the foam, and transfer to sterilized jars. Seal with new lids according to manufacturers' instructions.

*Newsletter by Carol Price Spurling - www.plumassignment.net
Illustration by Alice Swan*