



Famous Berries: Members of the Northern American Strawberry Growers Association, almost 80 of them, visited David Pike's strawberry fields in Farmington Tuesday to study his method of growing berries using the plasticulture system.

Pike's berry good tour

Story and Photos By
Sheila McMillan

FARMINGTON — David Pike was proud to show off his fields to two bus loads of strawberry growers from across the United States and Canada on Tuesday.

The Northern American Strawberry Growers Association, about 80 members attending, came to Pike's fields to get tips on his method of growing the sweet, red berries.

"I'm using the plasticulture system," Pike explained to the group. "As compared to the matted row system." With the plasticulture system, raised beds are used with plastic covering the beds where dormant bare-root transplants are planted.

Pike said watering is accomplished with drip irrigation tubes buried under the plants for feeding and watering. He said the system conserves water.

"It's done quite frequently in Florida, California and North Carolina, but the use of this type of system diminishes as you get north," he said.

"By and large I don't use any her-



Heavenly: Linda Yoder of Morganstown, West Virginia, a member of the Northern Strawberry Growers Association, enjoys the berries at Pike's strawberry fields on Tuesday.

bicide for the first two fruiting years," said Pike. "I'm still playing with that. I'm also using floating row covers for protection verses straw.

The members of the association

took notes and sampled berries, some dipped in chocolate by Pike's wife, Verna, as they toured his fields in which he grows 25 different varieties of berries.

"I'm trying to discover which

ones do best with this system in order to help other growers out," Pike said, explaining that these tours by the association are about sharing growing tips with other growers. "They are meant to be educational and the findings are used a lot in research projects."

The tour included owners of nurseries owners, too, who have come to learn more about different ways to grow great berries.

"One nursery owner is coming from as far away as California, two from Canada and one is from Massachusetts," he said before they arrived.

Pike said the plasticulture system gives him earlier berries.

"We've changed a lot here since we took over in 1974 and now we're trying to help provide change for other growers."

Pike received a grant from the federal government a couple of years ago to fund his experiments and he's adapted all of his original farm equipment to meet the needs of this new system. "I'm looking for quantity and quality," he said. "I'd like to be able to produce 30,000 pounds an acre. I'm not there yet, but I'm getting there."

Nation's berry growers take notes in Maine

By VALERIE TUCKER
Correspondent

ARMINGTON — David Pike's methods for producing the earliest strawberry harvest in the state drew an audience from across the nation Tuesday. Two bus loads of people bent over the rows and listened intently to the benefits of plastic mulch.

Pike is experimenting with a plasticulture system, more often seen in California and Florida. The plastic-covered rows are about 6 inches high and 2 feet wide. Neatly planted a foot apart, hundreds of healthy plants, with crowns heavy with large, shiny, red strawberries grow in the center of the half-acre long row. Weeds are nonexistent.

"You eliminate forty percent of the weeds with this black plastic method," Pike said.

On Tuesday afternoon, the North American Strawberry Growers Association's 2006 tour leader, Dr. David Handley introduced Pike to 80 professional growers, teachers, and nursery owners from as far away as California, Ontario, and Newfoundland. Handley, small fruits specialist at the University of Maine's Cooperative Extension program, had guided the group through a visit to the University experimental Highmoor Farm in Monmouth earlier in the day.

"The prospective yield and crop quality which we hope to see through adopting plasticulture could improve growers' profitability immensely," Handley said.

This is the first year the tour has come to Maine, and Pike's farm was chosen for its innovative success with different methods of increasing the length of the season and the quality and quantity of the berries. Strawberries are one of Maine's most important cultivated small fruit



Staff photo by Valerie J. Tucker

STRAWBERRY FIELDS: Dr. David Handley, the University of Maine Cooperative Extension Office's vegetable and small fruit specialist, introduces David Pike, one of the university's partners in experimental plasticology techniques to improve season length and production quality and quantity in the Northeast. The North American Strawberry Growers Association's annual tour made its first visit to Maine, and Verna and David Pike's Farm To You was selected as one of the destinations for the 80 members on the tour.

crops. According to University of Maine statistics, strawberry farmers produce nearly 3.2 million pounds of fruit, valued at \$2.5 million.

North Vassalboro farmer Lauchlin Titus, Maine's Vegetable and Small Fruit Growers Association president, shared experiences with a Lassen Canyon representative from California. Lassen Canyon is the largest strawberry producer in the world, according to Anne Geyer, the North American group's president. Anne Geyer traveled from Virginia to be part of the tour.

"These huge beautiful raspberries could go up against anything in the Pacific Northwest," Geyer said. "Pike's doing something hardly anyone north of Maryland said could be done."

Pike and his wife Verna, both

"Pike's doing something hardly anyone north of Maryland said could be done."

ANNE GEYER

Virginia

70, have operated the farm since 1974. They operated their Farm To You produce stand before the "U-pick" popularity spread. Each spring, cars travel down the narrow gravel road to the two acres of ripe strawberries. Pike's has extended his season until fall with his "plasticology" experiments.

"Farms like the Pikes' are one



Staff photo by Valerie J. Tucker

A SWEET SAMPLE: Anne Geyer, president of the North American Strawberry Growers Association, shows quarter-sized raspberries and juicy chocolate-dipped strawberries.

of the few hands-on experiences that our culture offers children to teach them they are connected directly to the earth," Geyer said.

Pike's partnership with the University of Maine will provide the nearly 300 commercial strawberry growers in the state with information they need to determine if plasticulture is feasible for their own farm's opera-

tion.

Pike's research will be presented to the Maine Vegetable and Small Fruit Growers annual meeting and the New England Vegetable & Berry Growers Association. Results will be shared with other agricultural research associations such as the American Society for Horticultural Science and the American Pomological Society.



Sheila McMillan/Franklin Journal

Beauties - Pike's Strawberries owner David Pike proudly shows the qualities of the berries coming out of his experimental patch. Pike used new technologies devised by the state's Farm To You Market project and tweaked them with some ideas of his own to produce berries earlier than usual and at a quantity and quality that is above the norm.

Berry early, berry good

David Pike picked his first Strawberry in the experimental section on Memorial Day and has already harvested more than 1,400 quarts

By Sheila McMillan
Staff Writer

WILTON - Pike's Strawberry's are not only the best, this year they're the first.

Robert Spear, Maine's commissioner of agriculture, visited David Pike's strawberry fields to see an innovative approach to strawberry cultivation that produces an earlier berry.

New Maine technologies, developed by the Farm To You Market of the Maine Department of Agriculture and tested at the Pike farm, have proven successful in extending the season and producing weed-free beds.

"This is great," Spear said as he viewed Pike's fields at the corner of Whittier and Wilton roads "What Pike has done here is to extend the



What A Crop - Strawberries just picked at the Pike Strawberry fields off the Wilton and Whittier roads.

season at the front end and every day on the front end makes a difference."

Pike has set aside one acre of his 2 3/4-acre field for the berry trial and he couldn't be prouder.

"The quality and the quantity is improved," Pike noted. "I've been evolving since I began growing berries here and with these new trials I'm now at about a nine (on a scale of one to ten) for this area."

Pike picked his first strawberry in the experimental section on Memorial Day and has already harvested 1,400 quarts from just one quarter of the trial acre. For most conventional growers, strawberries in this area aren't ready to pick until the end of June.

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The new cultivation system involves combining plastic mulch, which warms the soil in the early spring, and a floating row cover, which protects the plants during the winter when they are most vulnerable.

This method gives the plants a head start in the spring, resulting in an earlier-than-usual crop.

The use of a protective floating row cover seems to be more effective against winter kill, as opposed to straw, which has a tendency to blow around.

Pike has modified the system from those used in other states to better suit Maine's climate. He also uses a drip irrigation system and plants perennial dwarf rye grass in between the rows so there is no need for weed control.

Pike has been approved for a Sustainable Agriculture Research

and Education grant which will give him needed resources to document his growing process and cost effectiveness of the new system.

Pike's participation in the experiment may change the way farmers grow strawberries in Maine which, according to Pike's results, will increase both the season's length and profitability.

Pike said the traditional way of planting strawberries typically yields an average of 8,000 pounds per acre. The new way is producing 27,000 pounds per acre.

"We're doing everything we can to promote local agriculture and the purchase of that locally grown food," Spear said. "We want to keep farmers here and we're putting a lot of effort into it, so if you have a choice, please purchase Maine products," he added.



Congratulations - David Pike, of Pike's Strawberries, at left, received congratulations and a visit from Robert Spear, the commissioner of Maine's Department of Agriculture recently. Spear reviewed Pike's experimental strawberry patch where he used new techniques plus his own adjustments to grow the earliest and sweetest berries. Here, Spear and Pike talk about the successful project while standing at the edge of the strawberry patch.