

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.