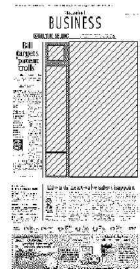


As farms dwindle, strawberries dig in



A.G. Kawamura, co-owner of Orange County Produce, checks out a strawberry field at the Great Park in Irvine, where he farms 100 acres in partnership with the urban park.

MARK RIGHTMIRE, ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER



High-value crop persists in O.C. due to adaptive strategies of local growers.

By MARNI USHEROFF
 ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

In recent weeks, acres of chilled strawberry plants have been plucked by their roots up near the Oregon border and shipped to Orange County. Painstakingly planted by hand in the warmer Southern California fields, the naked plants are tricked into thinking it's spring, and they sprout leaves in a matter of days.

Some farmers start to see patches of red berries by Thanksgiving and are harvesting several 10-pound trays per acre of sweet strawberries come Christmas.

It's the start of the planting season for strawberries, a dwindling crop in an increasingly urbanized county.

Last year, slightly less than 900 acres of strawberries were planted in Orange County, producing a crop worth about \$30 million. That's down from 1,632 acres in 1969. But strawberries remain the second-largest crop by value here, behind decorative trees and other plants. And their decline hasn't been as sharp as that of other produce; oranges were grown on just 71 acres last year, down from 15,462 acres 43 years earlier.

The persistence of local

strawberry fields is explained in part by simple economics: Consumers are willing to pay a higher price for a pound of berries than, say, a pound of oranges.

"When land and water and other input costs are high, then economic theory would tell you that you have to produce a

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 high-value crop, and strawberries are one of the highest-value crops per acre," says Karen Klonsky, an agricultural economist at UC Davis.

But it also reflects the ability of remaining farmers to adapt – whether it's catering to local consumers, leasing land under power lines, providing berries to specialty markets at a premium or hosting farm tours for city dwellers and suburbanites who want to see where their food comes from.

"They've kind of gone to the regional food-shed model with agricultural tourism or certainly the roadside-stand, local-grown businesses," says A.G. Kawamura, 57, co-owner of Orange County Produce LLC, which has strawberries on nearly 80 acres in Irvine, San Juan Capistrano, Seal Beach and Los Alamitos.

Kawamura's family originally focused on vegetables, shipping them as far off as Chicago, New York and Boston. It got into the strawberry business by selling neighboring farmers' berries outside of the region, a deal motivated by an oversaturated Southern California strawberry market in the late 1950s.

The Kawamura family started growing its own berries around 1990 to pick up the slack left by some growers who didn't have any heirs.

"At the same time, we started to see that we were not able to make money with some of the vegetable crops," Kawamura says. The family's cost of production here was higher than in Mexico or nearby Ventura County. Those areas, he says, "had cheaper rent, cheaper water, cheaper labor, cheaper regulatory" conditions.

"We found ourselves really good growers of vegetables but not able to differentiate our products enough to get the extra dollars we needed to offset our cost," Kawamura says.

In 2011, the average producer price for California strawberries – or what the farmer received – was 76 cents per pound, according to the California Department of Food and Agriculture. That compares with 20 cents for a pound of celery and 16 cents per pound for oranges. In all of California, strawberries are still a big business, worth more than \$2.3 billion in 2011.

Orange County Produce's core business now is strawberries and green beans. But it has partnered

with the Great Park in Irvine to grow and test a variety of fruits and vegetables, including figs, walnuts and asparagus.

“We’re trying to show that agricultural urbanism does have a place in a metropolitan park,” Kawamura says. In the process, Orange County Produce gets to benefit from a lease on roughly 100 acres of precious land within the park.

Orange County Produce demonstrates to the public the value and feasibility of urban farming by collaborating with the park’s smaller Farm + Food Lab and Veteran’s Agricultural Learning-Opportunities and Resources fields.

The Farm + Food Lab is akin to a large urban garden filled with fruits, vegetables and flowers, run by the UC Cooperative Extension Master Gardeners program.

On the VALOR fields, veterans learn how to farm a variety of fruits and vegetables. Much of the produce is donated to local food banks.

Kawamura can also use these sites to test new iterations of various crops before trying them on a larger portion of the park acreage that Orange County Produce farms commercially. Some of the water- and land-conserving techniques it is testing include vertical-

ly stacked hydroponic strawberries, grown by partner Alegria Fresh, and long tubelike bags of potting soil where Orange County Produce grows golden beets.

“What we’re doing is taking a good hard look at it to see if we can’t scale it up into a true commercial operation,” Kawamura says.

Not far away, along Jeffrey Road in Irvine, the Original Manassero Farms’ strawberries persist on a plot of land leased from Southern California Edison. “It’s good land to farm since it’s zoned for open space and it’s under the power lines, so there can’t be much else there,” says owner Dan Manassero, 57.

He’s cobbled together 30 growing acres from fields that include oil company-owned land in Brea. The landlord can earn income by leasing to Manassero while it sorts out development plans for the parcel.

Manassero has adapted to encroaching suburban sprawl by selling 30 percent of his products at five market stands and the remainder to wholesale distributors or Whole Foods stores in Newport Beach, Tustin, Laguna Beach and Long Beach.

“We used to be almost 100 percent through distributors, but then costs keep going up so we had to try to sell more direct to the public for higher prices,” Manassero says. “You gross more money on small acreage.”

His business diversified by growing heirloom tomatoes and more organic crops such as beans and cucumbers, which are pop-

ular and yield higher prices.

Another Irvine strawberry farmer, Tanaka Farms, has changed its model drastically by bringing the public to the farm. Kenny Tanaka, 30, a fourth-generation California farmer, says that when his father, Glenn, took over the business in the 1980s, it was a wholesale operation growing 200 acres of strawberries and tomatoes.

While navigating many ups and downs, the family overhauled its business, switching primarily to an agritourism model. It charges visitors a fee for a guided tour of the farm in a tractor-pulled wagon. During traditional strawberry season, March through June, about 15,000 schoolchildren visit the fields for \$12 a head, which includes a one-pound basket of berries.

About six years ago, the Tanakas also began a community-supported agriculture program delivering boxes of produce to people at local schools and businesses.

“We started off at just one school, and now we deliver to over 100 different schools and businesses,” Kenny Tanaka says. “It’s probably around 40 percent of our total business.”

The Tanakas still operate a stand that accounts for maybe 20 percent to 30 percent of their income, and the tours make up an additional 30 percent or 40 percent of the business. In addition to saving the family farm, agritourism kept Kenny Tanaka in the family business.

“I like seeing the kids out there interacting with the

parents," he says.

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Building a better berry

Kirk Larson, a plant physiologist at the South Coast Research and Extension Center in Irvine, has spent 23 years studying strawberries. He has worked with farmers around the world, helping them experiment with various kinds of strawberries.

"What we do mainly is try to develop newer, better strawberries," Larson says. "What we're after are varieties that don't take a lot of care, that bloom early and throughout the season, that don't have peaks and gaps in production, and

have tolerance to soil pathogens."

He cross-pollinates different varieties to tweak certain qualities of the plant and develop a better hybrid. For example, a berry may have great flavor but needs more firmness. Or maybe a bigger fruit is needed to compensate for the high cost of labor to pick the fruit. Larson is concerned about the plant's efficiency.

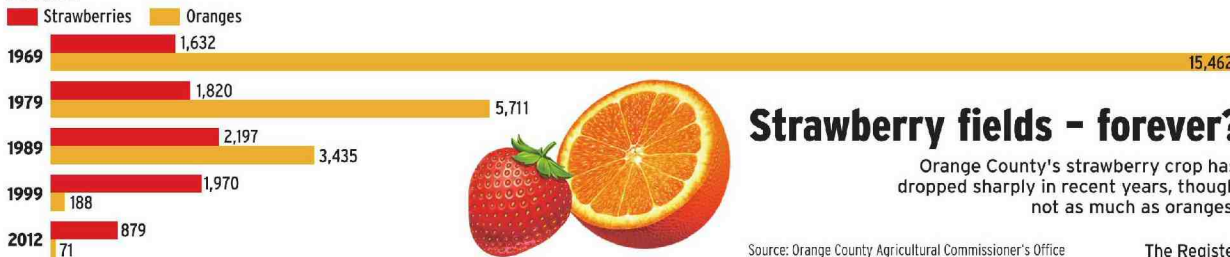
Larson says the center has just planted 290 new selections (crosses) of strawberries, and it has maybe 70 advanced items that scientists have been watching for at least a couple years. Timing can vary a little, but it usually takes six to eight years for something they've been watching to make it to consumers.

- Marni Usheroff

"When land and water and other input costs are high, then economic theory would tell you that you have to produce a high-value crop, and strawberries are one of the highest-value crops per acre."

KAREN KLONSKY
 AGRICULTURAL
 ECONOMIST
 AT UC DAVIS

ACERAGE



Strawberry fields - forever?

Orange County's strawberry crop has dropped sharply in recent years, though not as much as oranges.

Source: Orange County Agricultural Commissioner's Office

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