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Technology, changing markets fuel berry farm transition

Strawberry Tyme Farms is banking on tabletop and tunnel production

BY LILIAN SCHAEER
Ontario Farmer

New ways of doing traditional things – in this case, berry growing – is driving change at a long-time Norfolk County fruit and vegetable farm near Simcoe.

That means day neutrals, tunnel production, strawberries grown on tabletops and raspberries grown in pots – changes that John Cooper, who's been farming since the 1970s, hopes will set up his sons Dalton and Mason for decades of success at Strawberry Tyme Farms.

Strawberry Tyme is one of the largest strawberry growers in Ontario, but it's been part of what John Cooper called a 40-year transition in a presentation to Toronto-area food influencers who visited his farm in early September as part of an outreach program run by Farm & Food Care Ontario.

"We used to be 100% apples until the early 1980s, then we moved into strawberries, vegetables and tobacco," John explained. "We added a small strawberry nursery in the 1970s and expanded in the 1980s to begin shipping plants to Florida. Eventually, I zeroed in on the fact that I'm in the nursery business and growing some fruit."

North America's berry growing world changed in the late 1990s with the advent of day neutral strawberries. Traditional June-bearing strawberries initiate their flower buds the fall before as days get shorter and develop fruit as the days get longer in the spring, with berries ready for picking in June. The length of days doesn't matter for day neutral berries, however, and they'll continue to make buds throughout summer and into fall, dramatically extending berry season.

Cooper was one of the first in Ontario to embrace the new



Dalton Cooper, left, and his father John inside one of the tunnels where they grow strawberries on tabletops

day neutral varieties while still expanding the farm's nursery business with exports to the United States and across Canada.

"I realized I was far too exposed to a single income source and needed to diversify so we began growing the day neutral (berry) business and added raspberries – and by 2017 or so, we tipped from being a nursery growing some fruits to a fruit grower growing some nursery," John said.

It was 2018 when sons Dalton and Mason decided they wanted to farm, he said, and

that set Strawberry Tyme on a new path of overhauling their traditional field-based production to growing strawberries on tabletops in tunnels.

This is a system that is widely used in Europe, and in addition to lending itself well to future automation opportunities, it protects fruit volume and quality against the ravages of an increasingly volatile climate.

Strawberries and raspberries are delicate fruits, vulnerable to weather damage, as well as too much moisture, which can cause disease problems.

The transition began with a

two-acre block of tabletops in tunnels, expanding to eight acres in 2019 and 15 acres in 2021. At the same time, raspberry plants were transitioned from growing in the soil to growing in individual pots, also under tunnels, making for easier fruit harvest and plant management.

"The market has changed over the last 40 years; there used to be large pick your own operations all over Ontario, but that has gone through a decline as fewer growers are doing it," John said, adding their family's business has always been

focused on the wholesale market.

That used to include processed and frozen berry products too, but once imported berry puree was available at a lower price than what Cooper could pay his grower suppliers for processing berries, the decision to exit that business stream was an easy one, he said.

All tunnel-growing berries are on a drip irrigation system for water and fertilizer, and although the plants aren't physically producing more fruit, the system does mean "more berries in the box" because there is less weather loss and waste.

It's also easier for workers as they can harvest more berries more quickly with less physical demand. This boosts their earning potential as they're paid a piece work rate per picked flat of berries over and above their base wage rate, which is set by the provincial government.

That's an important consideration for the Strawberry Tyme Farms workforce, most of whom are seasonal or temporary international workers keen to maximize their income while they're in Canada.

"When June berries come on, we have guys earning \$30 to \$40 an hour; they can make a good amount of money picking now with tabletops," said Dalton Cooper of the farm's international workers. "There is a lot of negativity about off-shore workers but there shouldn't be; they are grateful to be here and we're grateful to have them."

"We have a constant local job ad running and no one ever applies."

Overhauling an entire production system is not an easy transition though, but one the Coopers hope will be rewarding.

"It sounds like we are innovators and going after it, but it all costs a lot of money and there is no outside funding to transition to a new crop," John said. "It takes a long time for a new crop to pay its way, but we are banking on the future of the industry."



Growing strawberries in tunnels is a system widely used in Europe as it makes harvest and plant management easier and protects plants and fruit from weather damage