

POTENTIAL FOR VEGETABLES DURING THE STRAWBERRY SEASON

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The potential of bringing early vegetable crop sales into the strawberry season is a marketing opportunity worth considering. It makes sense to have early season vegetable crops available as customers come out for the first strawberries of the season. Promotion of the nutritional aspects of fresh fruits and vegetables such as the '5 a day' campaign has led to increased consumer interest in eating right, and direct marketers are uniquely situated to meet these needs with fresh, flavorful, locally grown produce.

Strawberries are known as a "power" item in direct marketing terminology, and will draw customers from large distances to purchase or u-pick the first fruits of the season. Having fresh vegetables available during strawberry harvest season adds variety and selection for these customers. The addition of vegetables to the marketing mix is a way to increase dollars per sale and net income.

Making the Decision to Diversify:

Are spring vegetables right for your situation? There are a number of factors to consider when deciding to diversify and add new crops to an already established strawberry operation.

1. How will the addition of vegetables reflect on the operation bottom line? If you have not yet met full strawberry demand, how will rates of return compare between vegetables versus an expanded strawberry enterprise?
2. What are your time and labor constraints? Most vegetable crops are labor intensive, from planting through harvest. Certain crops may lend themselves well to pick your own, while others will require multiple harvests and use of labor which may be dedicated to strawberries.
3. Do you have the capital and equipment to successfully diversify? Available land area for expansion and crop rotation should be considered with vegetables. Specialized equipment such as a bed shaper and plastic mulch layer, along with a fumigation rig may be advisable for some crops and certain soil types. Greenhouse space, potting mix and plastic trays may be needed for growing transplants. Most strawberry planters double as a vegetable transplant setter, and greater utilization of this piece of capital equipment would be a plus. Vegetables such as asparagus and rhubarb are perennial, making initial establishment costs high, but yearly expenses are lower than annual vegetables or strawberries.
4. Soil types should be considered. Though strawberries can be successfully grown on heavier soils, most vegetables grow best on well-drained loam to sandy loam soils. Considering the earliness of spring-sown crops, soil characteristics are an important factor in well-timed site preparation and planting, as well as harvest access for tractors and harvest bins in wet springs. Selective site preparation for vegetable crops could be done in the fall prior, which can alleviate spring weather constraints.
5. How would you market the new crops? Consider that in comparison to strawberry sales. Vegetables are often sold in smaller quantities, and at a lower premium per pound of produce. As mentioned they may or may not be appropriate for u-pick, and pre-pack or bulk sales at the stand that may be a better choice. Overlap of spring vegetables with the strawberry season is important, and harvest timing is affected by crop and variety choices, weather, and hectic planting season schedules. If you do not have a season-long market, vegetables maturing after the strawberry season may be difficult to sell.

6. The best success stories with specialty crop growers are those who focus on only a few crops and learn to grow them well before further expansion. For the busy strawberry season, good advice may be to focus on the addition of only one or two vegetable crops to add to the seasonal mix. Other market items could be contracted or purchased from other growers.

Crop Ideas:

There are a number of vegetable crops that overlap with the strawberry season. Perennial vegetables include asparagus and rhubarb. Annual crops classified as cool season which tolerate early spring planting include most of the cole crops: broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage; root crops: table radish, turnips, beets, green onions; leafy crops and greens: kale, collards, mustard, lettuce, swiss chard and spinach; and legumes: peas, both shelled and edible pod types.

All of these crops and many more can be successfully spring grown in Virginia. Of these, several deserve particular attention: asparagus, rhubarb, peas, greens and broccoli. For pick-your-own, asparagus and also peas trained to a trellis may be the best choices, provided customers are given picking guidelines. Kale, collards and mustard greens have also been successfully grown as u-pick crops, and have added appeal when marketed as "spring greens". As a high value crop, and well in demand, broccoli also has potential for u-pick, or for pre-pick sales. In addition to these crops, rhubarb still exhibits strong demand by older clientele, and there has been increased interest in the crop commercially. Rhubarb should be selectively harvested by careful pulling of outside stalks, so does not lend itself well to u-pick customers.

Summary:

As a complement to strawberries, and as a way to increase dollars per sale during a season of high customer traffic, early vegetable crops offer great potential. Before adding a vegetable crop to the mix, growers should consider the economics and production requirements of each crop, and how well they will fit and overlap with the strawberry operation. Rather than adding a number of crops, it may be best to focus on one or two with the best potential for your marketing situation. Crops that have pick-your-own possibilities are particularly good candidates, saving on harvest labor costs.