

FRESH STRAWBERRY PRODUCTION

Ireland's favourite soft fruit

The main soft fruit crop grown in Ireland is the fresh strawberry. This is worth an estimated €47m per annum. The number one strawberry grown at present is the cultivar Malling Centenary. This cultivar gives a very high percentage class-one fruit quality, leading to greater productivity and efficiencies on the farm. Most strawberries are now grown under cover, using either tunnels or glasshouses. This has allowed the season to be extended with high-quality strawberries available from March until November. This makes it possible to grow strawberries in almost any part of the country, giving a great opportunity for producers to supply their local market.



Fresh strawberries are now produced from March until November.

Sustainability

Growers now operate under the principles of integrated pest management (IPM). Most insect pests are now controlled by using beneficial insects. An increasing amount of plant diseases are also being controlled by naturally occurring beneficial agents. Strawberry crops are pollinated by the buff-tailed bumblebee (*Bombus terrestris ssp. audax*), which is native to Britain and Ireland. All growers must also operate under the food

hygiene programme of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM). Growers are also encouraged to join the Origin Green sustainability programme run by Ireland's food board, Bord Bia. Both of these programmes carry several sustainability demands, including a reduction in carbon and energy use on the farm, and the adoption of the most environmentally friendly practices possible.

Benefits

- Strawberries can be grown for local supply in almost any part of the country.
- Customers have a preference for locally grown produce.
- Provides an excellent income – can supplement an existing job, as most of the work is seasonal.
- Provides local employment.
- Scores very high in sustainability.

Facts and figures

- Excellent opportunities for new entrants to supply the local market.
- At least 8,000 tonnes of fresh strawberries produced each year, worth an estimated €47m.
- Annual growth of about 10%.
- The vast majority of strawberries are sold and consumed in Ireland.
- Protected cropping is the mainstay.
- The season now runs for up to 10 months.
- Strawberries are seen as healthy and nutritious by the consumer.
- Growing methods are very advanced in terms of sustainable farming.

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Modern production of strawberries

Most strawberry crops in Ireland are grown on tabletop systems. These are essentially steel gutter supports, which are either raised off the ground or suspended from glasshouse or tunnel roof supports. The tabletop is usually raised about 1.5m from ground level. This greatly improves the productivity on the farm by making crop management and strawberry harvesting much more efficient. The quality of the fruit is also superior to that grown in the soil, due to better air circulation in the crop.

The strawberry crops themselves are grown in various types of growing substrate in pre-made modules or growing containers. The modules or containers are placed into the steel gutter for the full length of the crop's growing cycle.

The gutters are also used to collect all the leachate from the strawberry crop, which can be recycled and reused, adding to

greater sustainability. Nutrition for the crop is provided by way of water-soluble fertilisers.

These are delivered to the crop by drip-line irrigation, using a fertiliser injection system.

While the season is extended through the use of different protective structures (glasshouses, tunnels, etc.),

the use of cold-stored strawberry plant technology also plays a vital role.

This is known in the trade as 60-day production.

In late spring and summer, strawberry plants are removed from a special cold store and planted. The plants will begin to fruit approximately 60 days later. The volume of strawberry plants planted will depend on the amount of fruit the grower needs for their markets. This technology, combined with the use of different protective structures, has allowed the strawberry season to be extended up until November.

Protective cropping

The area of strawberries grown in glasshouses has been increasing every year. For the earliest strawberry cropping, a modern glasshouse is essential, where the environment is controlled by sophisticated computer technology. There is also a large area of strawberries grown under

polytunnels. One tunnel type, the Spanish tunnel, is the most popular. They are used mainly to produce fruit from May to September. The plastic covers are removed for the winter. The tunnels can also be designed for areas with higher wind exposure.

Grants, schemes available

Any project undertaken may be eligible for a capital grant of up to 40% of costs (50% for those aged under 35) from the DAFM. This scheme is competitively based and is for new capital investments in the commercial horticulture sector only.

Further information

For further information please contact
Eamonn Kehoe, Soft Fruit Advisor at:
☎ +353 (0)53-917 1350
✉ eamonn.kehoe@teagasc.ie

The following resources are also helpful:

- 🌐 www.teagasc.ie/crops/horticulture/fruit-production/
- 🌐 www.agriculture.gov.ie/farmerschemespayments/horticultureschemes/

Fact sheet produced by Eamonn Kehoe, Soft Fruit Advisor.

Markets



There are opportunities in local markets.

The greatest proportion of fresh strawberries is supplied to several Irish retailers and wholesalers. Local sales in terms of local shops, farmers' markets and roadside sales are also very important outlets. The vast majority of strawberries are sold on the Irish market. New entrants should first seek out local opportunities, where there may be a shortage of strawberries.

Yields and returns

Teagasc research has shown that a yield of over 1.2kg per plant was obtained over two growing seasons. This is an excellent result for a two-season cropping system using heated glass. Class one quality was over 90%.

It is also possible to force a single crop over one season using heated glass. Some growers have done this and have obtained yields of up to 1.3kg per plant. This single cropping has the major advantage of reducing some variable costs, giving a higher profit margin. It also carries the advantage of not having to over-winter the variety, where plant disease risks are higher.

Returns from a one-hectare glasshouse* crop at 10 plants/m²:

0.45kg/plant at €6.16/kg	€277,500
Farm gate value	€131,900
	or €2.93/kg

New glasshouse capital cost of €1.2m, excl. 40% capital grant.