

# Connecticut Weekly AGRICULTURAL REPORT

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Connecticut Department of Agriculture  
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## HEAT LAUNCHES STRAWBERRY SEASON INTO FULL SPEED

### Cheshire Farm Revives Pick-Your-Own Business

By Steve Jensen, Office of Commissioner Steven K. Reviczky

**CHESHIRE** - When Zentek Farms started offering pick-your-own strawberries in the late 1960s, customers had to literally watch their step if family matriarch Nellie was in the fields.

"She and my grandfather planted all the fields by hand and she didn't like the idea of people stepping on her strawberries," current farm owner Paul Zentek recalled Tuesday. "She'd go out in the rows and yell at people picking a hundred feet away. She was a tough one."

These days, the atmosphere in the pick-your-own rows is a lot more casual, as customers wander through the fields filling baskets and munching an occasional sample.

After weeks of persistent rainy and cool conditions that delayed ripening by about a week, the recent hot

spell has accelerated the picking season into full speed at farms across the state. Workers at Zentek have been picking about 500 quarts a day, said Ben Zentek, Paul's son.

"They're ripening so fast that we can pick in every row every day, as opposed to picking every other row like we normally do," Ben said as he walked through the fields. "We got started about a week late, but hopefully the season will extend a week later on the other side."

Ben said he was actually hoping for a little rain this week to help some of the berries "size up." Not too much rain though, he said, because a heavy storm can damage the fruit and produce mold in the rows.

Nellie and her husband Pawel had bought the farm in 1914 after emigrating from Poland.

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After establishing a customer base for their tomatoes, peppers and eggplant, the couple decided to try their hand with a few acres of strawberries.

"It was an early crop so that meant early money," Paul said.

As subsequent generations of Zenteks took over, the farm began to focus on growing and selling annual flowers and vegetable plants, and strawberries were abandoned for many years.

The family decided to start planting berries again in 2014, and the farm now supplies a number of farmstands in the area. The pick-your-own business is growing slowly, Ben said, as word gets out that they are again offering it.

Customers tend to return to the same farm every season, he said, so he expects it will take a few years to build a loyal following, especially when they are competing with larger farms that advertise heavily.

For the past two years, Zentek has supplied berries for Cheshire's annual strawberry festival, which has drawn them some new customers.

"People like to pick local, so I think that once word gets around that we're here we'll be a lot busier with the pick-your-own," Ben said.

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The farm also grows about 60 acres of vegetables, including tomatoes that were finally able to be planted this week after fields dried out enough to be worked.

Strawberries are a perennial, but the Zenteks chop the fields and plant new ones at least every other year.

"After the first year, the berries just don't get as big," Paul explained.

So far, the farm has sold out their berry harvest every season, prompting them to plan an annual expansion.

"I'd like to add at least one new field every year," Ben said. "There's definitely a big market out there for strawberries."

**Connecticut Grown strawberries are June's featured crop in Dept. of Agriculture promotions on broadcast and internet radio, as well as social media.**

**The "Just say yes to #CTGrown strawberries!" campaign – funded by a USDA Specialty Crop Grant, includes the message:**

**"Shortcake, jam, or FRESH from the field...how do YOU eat your Strawberries? Strawberry picking is FUN for the whole family! Head to a Connecticut strawberry patch today to create lasting memories and delicious dishes. Plan your visit at**

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**Above:** Ben Zentek shows some of the ripe strawberries in the farm's pick-your-own fields

**Above right:** A 1924 photo taken at the farm showing Paul Zentek's grandparents, Pawel and Nellie, and other family members.

**Right:** The Farm, in Woodbury, is offering an unusual addition to its spring annual hanging basket line this year: the Hula Berry, a white strawberry that tastes like a pineapple. The berry needs three white berry plants to one red berry plant planted in close proximity for pollination.

"They are growing really well and customers are very interested in this berry," said Michael Berecz, whose family owns The Farm. "We plan on selling some as is in the baskets, and keeping some for field production."

**Page 1 left:** A graphic that is part of the Dept. of Agriculture's social media promotion of Connecticut Grown strawberries.

**Page 1 right:** Ross Merriam, 2, of Cheshire, pops a berry in his mouth while picking at Zentek Farms Tuesday with his mother, Lauren.



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