

Issue 1 – May 1, 2024

# Fruit Crop Report



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## Weekly Provincial Overview

Welcome to the first fruit crop report of 2024. Fruit tree crops are starting to emerge from dormancy, with bud swell starting on most trees. Strawberries are still under straw mulch as the risk of hard frosts (< -5°C) is still high. Expect bulk of straw mulch to be removed from strawberry fields the second week of May, weather permitting. Welcomed spring rain should help with plant vigour and growth of all fruit crops.

## Commercial Fruit Crops- Timely Topics

### Pricing Berries

Taste is King- Commercial fruit growers sell a premium product that has amazing flavour and taste that cannot be bought in grocery stores so it needs to be priced accordingly.

For pricing, strawberries have the most data to compare to from a retail perspective. In 2023 the price range for u-pick to pre-pick strawberries was \$4.29-\$6.49/lbs (2023 Manitoba Agriculture Statistics). Compare that to the average retail price for strawberries in Winnipeg for June and July in 2023 of \$5.07/lbs to \$4.93/lbs respectively (2023 Statistics Canada retail price data). In general, prices charged by strawberry growers for their superior product are comparable to grocery store prices, and a bargain for u-pick customers. By freezing berries harvested in-season, customers can enjoy tasty, highly nutritious berries throughout the year.

### Successful Marketing and Pricing Strategies for Manitoba Berry Growers

- 1) Use Cost of Production (COP) guides to calculate your costs which will help you determine your price per pound to be profitable. Remember you need to pay yourself as you would any other employee, this is a business not a hobby. (Strawberry & Saskatoon COPs available from Manitoba Agriculture [Fruit Crop Specialist](#))
- 2) Determine your market region. Proximity to larger urban areas like Winnipeg allows for higher price points due to higher market demand. Economics 101: Demand > Supply = Higher Prices.
- 3) Find out how much your nearest berry grower is charging to avoid under-cutting on price; in a race to the bottom everyone loses profit. Your profitable price may be higher or lower than other berry farms due to different costs of production, acres in production, and other factors. Larger farms will typically have lower cost of production per pound of berries due to higher volumes of berries produced, distributing input costs over more acres.
- 4) Berry growers are not competing against each other, they are competing against berry imports for the most part. The more growers in close proximity, the more customers attracted to that region as they know if one berry farm is picked out, neighbouring berry farms may still be picking.

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- 5) Consider increasing prices yearly, as cost of production increases. Small increases in price are easier for customers to accept than large infrequent increases. For every customer that balks at a small price increase, there are more to take their place to buy your berries.
- 6) Make u-picking an experience for your customer for repeat visits.  
*“The power of a pick-your-own business extends beyond their ability to bring customers onto a farm. Our culture is starving for connections to nature. It’s one more way that people can feel connected — connected to their food, connected to where they live, U-picks do a huge service for connecting people to our food system, and especially the seasonality of food ... and [gives farmers] the opportunity to have important conversations with people who can support agriculture more actively.”* Anu Rangarajan, director of the Cornell Small Farm Program.

Note: Manitoba Agriculture’s fruit crop program conducts a price survey annually on all commercially sold berry crops.

## Strawberries

### When to Remove Straw Mulch

Remove mulch in the spring as new growth begins and new leaves become a light-yellow colour. This normally will occur between late April and early May for most locations, once the risk of hard frosts has passed, greater than minus 5°C typically.

Remove excess straw from the rows and aisles with a side delivery rake or specialty rake. Rotary mowers are also an excellent way of removing straw. The rotating blades place the straw into the aisles. Two passes over the rows will do a complete job.

Partial mulch removal delays development without harming growth. This practice can be used to delay bloom development and avert early frost damage to mature blooms.

Moving the straw mulch between the rows in the spring helps keep berries clean, conserves moisture, suppresses weeds and provides a pleasant picking area (source [Commercial Strawberry Production on the Prairies](#)).

## High Tunnel Strawberry Trial Update

### Early Season Strawberry Production in a High Tunnel Trial

Dormant strawberry plants were moved back into the high tunnel on April 10. Plants were covered with frost protection fabric anytime nighttime lows were forecasted to be below -1°C. Plants started regrowing by April 17. Data on plant winter survival counts and start of bloom on plants are being collected.