

Improving strawberry tray-plant production in Ireland.

Dr Eamonn Kehoe is a soft fruit specialist based at Teagasc, Johnstown Castle, Co.Wexford, and he describes research at Kinsealy Research Centre which has led to strawberry tray plant enterprises in Ireland.

the course of the research, total yields for cv. Elsanta exceeded 600g of fruit per plant each season. Fruit and plant quality characteristics were excellent and fruit yields and quality were outstanding, being equal to or better than those seen in more advantageous climates.

The fruit growing season in Ireland has changed fundamentally over the last decade. In the past, the strawberry season lasted from June to July. Today, through new technology the season has been extended from March to November. The strawberry industry has grown by over 270% over the last 15 years and is now worth an estimated €37 million.

In the past, most of the strawberry plants grown in Ireland had to be imported and there were often problems in relation to plant disease levels, stock quality and cost. With the extension of the growing season, Irish strawberry propagators had limited supplies of plants to meet demand from the expanding protected strawberry sector. Research was undertaken to establish and test a 'tray plant' production system for the Irish strawberry propagators who wished to set up such units to satisfy the increasing demand.

Added benefits

Strawberry tray plants also offer many advantages over soil-grown, 'bare-root' plants. Runners and cuttings are grown mostly in peat-based substrates, reducing the risk of infection by soil-borne diseases to a minimum. Plant nutrition can be controlled completely, plants can be more easily lifted during frost and wet conditions and the roots remain intact in comparison to bare-root plants. This improves plant storability and establishment after cold storage. These benefits of Irish-grown tray plants are leading to an increase in productivity and efficiency on the fruit farm.



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Tray plant research

As a result of this research, new strawberry 'tray plant' nurseries have been set up in Ireland to supply the home market. Plants are 50% cheaper to produce compared to imported material. Consequently, tray plant imports have been cut by at least 30% and it is also hoped to develop an export market. During



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