

# Santa Barbara County's No. 1 sweet crop: strawberries

Strawberries are the No. 1 crop in Santa Barbara County as of 2020, with over 10,500 acres planted countywide at a value of \$727,444,000. Avocados are second, with 5,768 planted acres.

I had no idea strawberries were such a major crop in Santa Barbara County, and as I started researching, many questions arose: Why are the seeds on the outside of the berry and not on the inside like other fruits? Why are they called strawberries? Do they grow worldwide or just in the U.S.?

Today, China is the top producer of strawberries globally, producing 3 million tons a year, or 40% of the total. The United States is second with 1.4 million tons, of which California has 70%. Mexico, Turkey and Spain round out the remaining top five producers worldwide.

History of the strawberry

Strawberries grew natively in Asia, Europe, and North and South America. Africa, Australia and New Zealand are the only areas that strawberries did not initially grow. When the colonists arrived in Virginia, the Native Americans were using wild strawberries in many dishes. A special one was a pastry made with strawberries and cornmeal. The natives and early colonists did not bother cultivating strawberries because they were so abundant in the wild.

The colonists sent wild strawberry plants back to Europe, as the Ameri-

can strawberries were larger and better tasting than those in Europe.

Fast forward to 1714, when a French spy on a mission in Chili to get information on Spanish fortifications spotted some local strawberries that were very large. He brought the plants back to France and planted them near some of the strawberry plants from Virginia. The two varieties cross-pollinated, and the result was big, bright, tasty, plentiful berries that no one in the world had seen before. These plants, grown purely by accident, are the ancestors of all the strawberries grown commercially today.

Over the years, more research has led to the creation of hybrids with better flavor, production of more and larger berries, the ability to resist disease, etc. Still, all stem from the cross of their Virginia and Chilean ancestors. The botanical name for the strawberries of today is *Fragaria x ananassa*. The letter "x" in its name indicates that the modern strawberry is of hybrid origin and, in the case of our contemporary strawberries, of two different species — one from Virginia and one from Chili.

Botanically, the "fruit" of the strawberry is not a berry at all. Strawberries are part of the rose (*Rosaceae*) family. The fleshy, edible part of the plant is derived not from the plant's ovaries but from the receptacle that holds the ovaries. Each "seed" on the outside of the fruit is one of the



ovaries of the flower. That is why the seeds are outside the berry, not within it as the seeds of actual fruits and berries are. When birds eat strawberries, they do not digest the seeds but pass them through along with their feces. When the seeds find fertile ground, they grow new plants with both the soil and fertilizer. That is why strawberries were so common in the wild.

How did strawberries get their name? One theory is that it originates from the fact that strawberry plants were often mulched with straw during the winter to keep the plants from freezing. Another idea is that strawberry is probably a corruption of "strewn berry" because the plants produced runners and spread. As a result, its berries were strewn about the

ground. A third theory is that English children picked wild strawberries, impaled them on grass straws and sold them to the public. No one knows for sure, but today, strawberry it is.

Commercial strawberry production

For commercial production purposes, plants are grown from runners and, in general, distributed as either bare-root plants or plugs. Cultivation follows two general models — annual plasticulture or a perennial system of matted rows or mounds. Greenhouses produce a small number of strawberries during the off-season.

Most modern commercial production uses the plasticulture system. In this method, raised beds are formed

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## SAN JOAQUIN COUNTY

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### Redistribución de Distritos para Supervisores del Condado de San Joaquin

El Condado de San Joaquin está comenzando el proceso de volver a trazar sus 5 límites de Distrito de Supervisión basados en los nuevos datos del Censo Federal. **Las líneas de distrito pueden moldear la capacidad de una comunidad para elegir al representante de su elección, por lo que es importante que escuchemos de ustedes.**

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#### ¡Haz que tu voz se escuche!

*"Esperamos involucrar a nuestra comunidad local y esperamos ver una buena participación en las reuniones comunitarias. En cuanto más participe nuestra comunidad, mejor servirán estos nuevos distritos a las personas que llaman hogar a este gran condado."*

- Supervisor del Condado de San Joaquin, **Miguel Villapudua**

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