

Straw is for Strawberries

by Kathleen Hatt

Early-harvest winter rye doesn't sprout

Photos by Kathleen Hatt.



Peachblow Farm, Charlestown, N.H. The farm's name comes from an earlier color of the farm house, peach-blossom pink.

In over 50 years of farming, Bob Frizzell has learned to grow only crops that will do well on his Charlestown, N.H., farm. Since he bought the farm from his parents in 1988, Frizzell has tried a number of different crops, including pick-your-own potatoes, on 110 acres of fields at the edge of the Connecticut River Valley. The crops he grows must fit three criteria: in addition to growing well at Peachblow Farm, the crop must be in demand in the area and fit into his other crops' schedules.

Seedless straw

Before Frizzell began growing his own mulch straw for the farm's 5 acres of pick-your-own strawberries, he purchased it. The problem with the straw he bought from New York or Canada was its tendency to propagate itself and its weeds in his strawberries because it was the usual kind, the byproduct of

grain production. Straw is usually the stalk left after grain has been separated from the stem. Between the time grain is threshed and stalks are mowed, some weed and grain seeds fall down between the stalks. Thus, most straw bales are full of grain and weed seeds that sprout when the straw is laid down for mulch. Because the straw that Frizzell grows is a primary crop harvested before the grain matures, it is free of viable grain seeds.

Beginning with a small plot some 15 years ago, Frizzell now cuts about 70 acres of winter rye straw. Before planting winter rye in early fall, he flattens fields to prepare them for harvesting with a small combine. He uses a roller containing 1,000 gallons of water for the job. Seed in the center of the straw patch is sown with a fertilizer spreader that can broadcast up to 50-foot swaths, but the 10-foot-wide edges are planted with a more precise Brillion seeder in order to keep the rye seed from spreading into adjacent fields of strawberries. Straw is cut in mid-June just before it begins to pollinate. Although there are winter rye seeds in Frizzell's straw, they are not mature and do not germinate. Weed seeds are another matter. Despite efforts to keep the crop clean, the straw may contain a few weed seeds that may germinate in the mulch. The straw grown at Peachblow Farm is acceptable for use by organic farmers as a soil amendment or mulching material.

After harvesting, baled straw is stacked on pallets remade from larger ones used by a nearby manufacturer. The pallets are stacked in a shed where they can be lifted and loaded into trucks.

Straw for strawberries, and garlic and houses

Seedless straw from Peachblow Farm, currently selling for \$6 a bale, is marketed to garlic and strawberry growers, and is also used to insulate the Frizzells' own 5 acres of pick-your-own strawberries. Put down in November after strawberries are dormant, the straw remains in place until late April when Frizzell uses a homemade rake to remove some of it. The remainder of the straw is kept between rows and between plants within a row to keep the berries clean.



Bob Frizzell, Peachblow Farm, Charlestown, N.H.

Cabot strawberries are the farm's primary variety, but Frizzell also grows several earlier types. Late strawberries do not work well with the farm's other crops, so Frizzell no longer grows them. About 90 percent of Peachblow Farm's strawberries are sold to pick-your-own customers between about June 24 and July 10. The remainder are wholesaled to farm stands.

The challenges of growing strawberries have not changed in the 40-plus years since Frizzell's wife Polly suggested they grow them. "It's all a challenge," says Frizzell, "the weeds, the frost, the bugs."



In the off-season, the pick-your-own strawberry stand is a place to sort and store asparagus and blueberries.

Like strawberries, garlic also benefits from the absence of competition from sprouting grain in straw. A less usual use of Peachblow Farm's straw is in straw bale construction. The absence of seeds in the straw makes it unattractive to rodents, and thus far two buildings have been successfully constructed of the farm's seedless straw.

The obvious question

What is the relationship between straw and strawberries? Are strawberries named because they are bedded in straw? Apparently not. The word strawberry may be derived from the Anglo-Saxon verb *strew*, to spread around, and *Bergen*, meaning berry or fruit. Or, there may be a connection involving growth habit, the fruit and runners appearing to be strewn along the ground. However, since there is no evidence that Anglo-Saxons grew strawberries on their land, these explanations may be questionable. Another explanation is that the word strawberry refers to the seeds on the outside of the fruit that look somewhat like straw chaff. One explanation etymologists seem to agree is false: strawberries are not named for the practice of mulching strawberries with straw to protect the fruits from rot.



Baled seedless straw is palletized to facilitate loading onto trucks.

"I'd quit without them"

Essential to keeping Peachblow Farm operating are two workers who are with the Frizzells from May 1 until October 31 each year. Leroy Silvera has been with the Frizzells for five years, and Anthony (Eddie) Edwards for 10. Both hold H-2A (seasonal agricultural worker) visas. They are paid an hourly wage and travel expenses, and housing is provided on a neighboring farm with other workers from Jamaica. In addition to working on crops, the two enjoy building stone walls.



Asparagus

The first spring task of Peachblow Farm's workers is cutting asparagus. The perennial crop, which is not

Butternut squash cure in the field for four to seven days to drain and heal.



In the open storage barn, Bob Frizzell moves a bin of butternut squash. On the left are bins of blue Hubbards.

mulched, was first planted on the farm in 1985. As far as Frizzell knows, no other area farm grows asparagus. Wholesaled in bunches of 1 to 1.25 pounds in 30-pound boxes, the crop is always in demand. Although annual asparagus yield has in some years exceeded 4,000 pounds, the 2008 yield from the farm's 4 acres was 3,289 pounds. When strawberries come in, asparagus cutting stops.

After straw come squashes

Following straw harvest, Frizzell plants squashes. He does not till. Before planting, he fertilizes with potash and potassium, applying nitrogen later when he knows he has a good crop. At harvest, butternut squash stems are broken off and the cut allowed to heal in the field for four to seven days. Squashes are shipped to wholesalers in either cardboard or 40-by-40-inch wooden bins. Annual yields include

100 tons of butternut, 20 tons of buttercup, 50 tons of acorn and 10 tons of blue Hubbard squashes. Acorn squash yield in 2008 was down to about 10 tons due to powdery mildew that formed during the year's wet summer.

Since pumpkins (mostly Howdens and Baby Pams) are planted later so that they ripen later in the fall, Frizzell sometimes gets as many as four crops from one field: strawberries and corn (planted by a neighbor), followed by pumpkins and winter rye.

To keep busy during the time between strawberry picking and squash harvest, Peachblow Farm's seasonal workers, along with Polly Frizzell, pick blueberries at area pick-your-own farms. The Frizzells wholesale the berries to farmstands and grocery stores.

Other "crops"

If any of Peachblow Farm's crops can be said to be traditionally New England, it would be rocks. Available in boxes weighing about a ton, field stones are harvested and dried, but not brushed or polished, and stored in wooden crates. First packaged for sale in 2007, rocks are marketed to landscapers and others building stone walls or other features.

Wood rounds out Peachblow Farm's year. Hardwood firewood is available in bins at \$50 for approximately a quarter of a cord. To make lumber for his own use, Frizzell enjoys using his small sawmill. "My sawmill is my golf," he says.

Localvores help

Once spoiled with year-round fresh food from great distances, consumers have recently begun turning to fresh, seasonal food grown locally. For a farmer who grows only crops in demand that grow well on his farm, this consumer trend has become the happy conjunction of agricultural philosophy and economic reality.

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