

Phone interview with Pete Maki, proprietor of Ostonek Strawberry Farm, Trenary, March 23, 2018

Pete Maki – 906-439-5911

12 acres strawberries – 4a new planting, 4a 1-yr old planting, 4a 2-yr old planting

80 rows, 600' long

Negatives of U-Pick strawberry farm

- Weather changes over last 5 years, not as good as 1970's – 1990's
 - Heavy rains
 - Sloping soil resulting in gullies
- Hard to find good help for the short periods needed (1-3 months)
 - Need 3 good workers during the summer
 - Hard, tedious, boring work out in the sun/weather
 - Lots of hoeing, from spring through October/Nov
- Start-up costs
 - \$2,000 for 4 acres of berry plants
 - Long pay-back – 2 years before berries get sold
 - Income received only 1 month per year (picking time)
- Irrigation needed (essential for frost protection)
 - Long work days when irrigating
- Your property is open to the public during picking season
 - Need a plan to handle the public
 - Need to have enough equipment for customers (carriers)
- Insect and weed control
 - Pesticide use is needed to maintain good production (organic or not)
 - Public may not like pesticide use
 - Need to be able to describe your system appropriately
- Mammal pest control
 - Deer, birds, rodents
- Long, hard workdays
 - Hoeing – spring through fall ('snow to snow')
 - Irrigation – frost control, normal irrigation
 - Draining off flooded areas after heavy rains (dig a hole and use 'trash' pump)
- Customer load can be overwhelming
 - 2 other strawberry U-Picks used to be in the area. When they closed (over 10 years ago), many of their regular customers came to our farm. 350 people waiting to pick on opening day. Results in near chaos, with too many people picking.
 - We had a 'call ahead' policy to check if the farm was open for picking. We never closed during the day if we opened in the morning. With too many customers, this sometimes resulted in over-picking, with customers getting partially ripe berries, and the fields needing 2 or 3 days rest to allow new berries to ripen.
- Customers usually don't follow instructions very well.
 - They were requested to move a flag to the place in the row where they finished picking. They often didn't do this, and the next customer picked over the same area instead of starting at the right spot.

- 10% of people do it right
- Need good luck
- Pre-picked orders worked OK when Mrs. Ostonek was available as 'secretary' to arrange orders and pickers. After she was gone, orders were ceased..

Benefits of U-Pick strawberry farm

- People pick your crop – free labor
- Pre-picked orders worked OK
- Liability insurance has not been an issue
- Lots of good, repeat customers
- The most fun part of the business was the smiling, laughing and happy customers