

North Carolina's strawberry season kicked off around the same time the first case of COVID-19 was diagnosed in the state. Now, local strawberry growers, who rely heavily on pick-your-own operations, are adapting to find new markets for their products.

Local greenhouse vegetable growers are also strengthening connections in their communities by offering new ways to order farm-fresh produce.

"None of our growers could have expected the impact of COVID-19 on the state," said Agriculture Commissioner Steve Troxler. "It is encouraging to see how quickly growers have responded to the situation and what extra measures they have taken to ensure consumers have access to fresh fruits and vegetables."

While strawberry growers already adhere to good agricultural practices, many are taking additional steps to ensure the health and wellbeing of their staff and consumers. Some of the steps taken include installing additional hand washing stations; providing hand sanitizers for employees and customers; requiring employees to wear disposable gloves while handling produce; and ensuring sick employees stay home. In addition, several pick-your-own farms have encouraged social distancing by limiting the number of rows that can be picked and limiting groups to 10 people or less.

Changes also are being made to the way customers order and pay for strawberries. Many growers are offering pre-orders with roadside pickup, allowing customers to stay in their car. While some farms are even offering home delivery. Offers vary by farm, and consumers are encouraged to check with individual farms for specific details. The N.C. Strawberry Association provides a listing of you-pick strawberry farms with contact information at www.ncstrawberry.com/farm-locator.

Strawberry growers began picking in mid-March in Eastern North Carolina. Growers in the Piedmont expect strawberries from mid-April through the first week of June. In Western North Carolina, strawberry lovers can find local berries from late April through the first week of July.

The N.C. Greenhouse Vegetable Growers Association, a trade organization that develops and promotes all phases of greenhouse vegetable production in the state, reports that growers are implementing a variety of techniques to better serve customers and maintain social distancing guidelines. Many growers, such as H.S. Howell Farms in Zebulon, have added pre-ordering and curbside pickup to their offerings. Others, like Rudd Farm in Greensboro, have turned their

operation into a drive-thru only service. Smith Nursery in Benson also has begun special hours for seniors and at-risk populations.

Tomatoes account for about 90 percent of the state's greenhouse vegetables, but other vegetables, such as cucumbers, lettuces and peppers, are also grown. While there is no official season for greenhouse vegetables, early spring is the busiest time of year for local growers. To find local greenhouse growers near you, go to www.ncgreenhouse.org.

North Carolina is the third-largest strawberry producer in the nation. In 2018, the state grew 1,100 acres of strawberries generating \$21.3 million in farm income.