

# THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

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## Berries finally here after cold, wet spring in Whatcom County

DAVE GALLAGHER - THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

Picking berries at Whatcom County farms right around the time school lets out is a time-honored tradition for many residents, but this spring Mother Nature has been holding out by socking this area with cold, wet weather.

The break in the rain the past few weeks has allowed the berry crops to get back on track, so local farmers are just about ready to declare the harvest season on, kicking off with strawberries.

Last week Boxx Berry Farms was able to start picking a few of its Honey-Eye strawberries for its retail store, but not enough to open things up for the u-pickers, said Mike Boxx. He believes the upcoming week will mean the arrival of the Puget Reliance variety of strawberries, bringing out enough volume to finally get the u-pick season going at his Northwest Drive farm.



KATIE GREENE | THE BELLINGHAM HERALD - Sam Grubbs, owner of Bellingham Country Gardens, samples a strawberry while he picks them Wednesday, June 15, in Bellingham. Grubbs said when he tasted the strawberries last week they didn't have any taste and was worried they wouldn't become ripe on time but said the strawberries this week were much sweeter.

- ➡ [List of summer u-pick, farm stands across Whatcom County](#)
- [Search our interactive map of U-pick farms in Whatcom County](#)

Boxx Berry has had to move its strawberry festival to June 24-26, the latest Mike Boxx can recall it happening.

"We've had years when we were picking in May, so this is really a big change," Boxx said. "We have a lot of anxious people ready to get started."

While plenty of grumbling about the wet weather took place earlier this spring, many farmers are happy with what's happened the past few weeks.

"It hasn't gotten super-duper hot, so there hasn't been much stress put on the plants," Boxx said.

Some of the no-spray u-pick berry crops appear to be in decent shape heading into the harvest. Sam Grubbs, who operates Bellingham Country Gardens, said they haven't seen much disease or mold despite all of the rain. He said last year was more challenging, when an early, warm spring followed by ill-timed rains damaged the harvest.

"It's looking good at this point," said Grubbs, who operates the farm at 2838 E. Kelly Road about a half mile west of Mount Baker Highway.

Planted on about 300 acres, strawberries are the smallest of the three major Whatcom County berry crops. They're the first to be harvested, followed by raspberries and blueberries.

Boxx estimates the strawberry harvest will last about 25 days, and the peak time for residents to pick them will be in the first week of July.

"This is the kind of season where (u-pickers) shouldn't wait until the end of the season," Boxx said.

The raspberries and blueberries appear to be on a more normal harvest schedule, starting with the raspberries in mid-July, followed closely by blueberries.

Along with the u-pick options, raspberries and blueberries are a main component of Whatcom's commercial agriculture economy: Last year 48.1 million pounds of raspberries were harvested on around 8,200 Whatcom County acres, down from 58.9 million pounds in 2009, according to data from the Washington Red Raspberry Commission.

About 17 million blueberries were harvested in Whatcom County last year, according to the Washington Blueberry Commission. It's estimated Whatcom County has about 2,600 acres dedicated to blueberry growing.

While it's too early to tell what's ultimately in store for raspberries and blueberries, both may have benefited from a few sunny days in early June, a time when the bees are busy pollinating.

"So far, my blueberries are looking about the same as previous years," said Mariah Butenschoen, owner of Breckenridge Blueberries at 3595 Breckenridge Road near Everson. She's expected to have her no-spray, handpicked blueberries available starting in mid-July.

While the cold spring left many berry farmers concerned about the harvest, the weather in the coming eight weeks will be the most crucial. Ideal for the farmers would be clear, sunny days with temperatures in the 70s. Lots of rain in the coming weeks would mean mold issues and could make it difficult for the commercial farmers to get the equipment working during the harvest. Extremely warm weather during the harvest would melt the berries onto the vines. Wind or hail would knock the berries off the vines, damaging the crop.

Since the weather is out of their control, farmers are focused on what they can do at the farm. For Grubbs, who has raised four children on the farm, it's a great time of year as they prepare for the group of u-pick visitors.

"We just love having families come out to the farm, it's a great educational experience for them," Grubb said. "There should be a lot of strawberries to choose from."

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