

## High Quality Strawberry Varieties

GEORGE L. SLATE AND D. K. OURECKY\*

The perfect strawberry according to E. P. Roe in "Success with Small Fruits," 1880, is "the strawberry of memory,—the little wildings that we gathered, perhaps, with those over whom the wild strawberry is now growing. We will admit no fault in it, and, although we may no longer seek for this favorite fruit of our childhood, with the finest specimens of the garden before us we sigh for those berries that grew on some far-off hillside in years still farther away."

**Fletcher**, whose knowledge of strawberries and their literature was great, wrote in 1917, "it is doubtful if the varieties most commonly grown now average as high in quality as in 1854, . . . We have few commercial varieties today that compare in quality with the Pines grown by the amateurs of that period. No modern sort has the exquisite flavor of Burr's New Pine, not even Marshall, or William Belt, our acknowledged standards of excellence."

**Wilson**, introduced in 1854, was the first great commercial variety. It was productive, firm enough to be shipped, sour and of poor quality. It was widely grown for many years and consumed by a public characterized by E. P. Roe as follows: "The number of people, however, with the digestion of an ostrich is enormous, and in multitudes of homes Wilsons, even when half-ripe, musty and stale are devoured with unalloyed delight, under the illusion that they are strawberries."

Strawberries have improved greatly since Roe wrote that statement in 1880; but the improvement has been mostly in commercial characteristics.

Those who appreciate and attempt to secure top dessert quality in strawberries are very few.

Since 1922, over 155,000 strawberry seedlings from 954 populations of known parentage have been grown at the New York State Agricultural Experiment Station, Geneva, New York. Most of the varieties introduced since that time, as well as many selections from other breeders, have been observed. From all of these strawberries, only seven are outstanding in dessert quality. These are Suwannee, Dorsett, and Fairfax from the U.S.D.A.; Fletcher, Geneva and N.Y. 1144 from Geneva; and Marshall, a chance seedling from Massachusetts.

**Suwannee** (Missionary x Howard Premier) selected in 1933 is the best flavored strawberry in our opinion. From New York to Mississippi it has been reported as exceptionally high in dessert quality. The berries are long-conic, attractive light red, soft, and early ripening. The plants, now virus-free from heat treatment at Beltsville, are unusually vigorous and productive enough for home use.

Suwannee, in spite of poor quality parents, has transmitted its characteristic flavor to many of its seedlings. However, when crossed with Fairfax, hopefully to produce the best-flavored of all strawberries, it provided only one promising selection from among 165 seedlings.

From the cross Midland x Suwannee made at Geneva, three selections have been named—Fletcher, Gala and Garnet. Of these, Fletcher, introduced in 1959, is near the top in flavor, and superior to Suwannee in berry size and productivity. Fletcher

\*Professor Emeritus and Associate Professor of Pomology, New York State Agricultural Experiment Station, Geneva, N. Y., respectively.

ripens with Sparkle, but maintains fruit size much better and is as good, or slightly superior for freezing. In 1968, when nearly all varieties and selections rotted very badly, Fletcher experienced much less rot than the others.

George Darrow hit the quality jackpot when he crossed what he thought was Royal Sovereign with Howard 17 (Premier) in 1923. Later he decided that the seed parent was probably Etter 450. From this cross came Fairfax, Dorsett, and Narcissa. These were of exceptionally high quality, but only Fairfax and Dorsett were suited to the East. Dorsett was a beautiful bright red berry of highest quality, but the plants were unproductive at Geneva because the later flowers were mostly sterile. It was eliminated later by virus troubles.

Fairfax is still available as a high quality home garden variety. Virus-free plants, now generally available, produce satisfactory crops. Fairfax flavor is at its peak only when the berries are fully ripe. Before this stage, flavor is not fully developed; and when it is overripe the flavor deteriorates. Overripe berries of Fairfax are somewhat liver-colored and unattractive, whereas Suwannee flavor is good before and after the berries are fully ripe.

Fairfax has been a good parent; Sparkle, Temple and Fairland being among its progeny. Some good quality seedlings of Fairfax have been raised at Geneva, but none were named.

**Geneva** [N.Y. 316 (Streamliner x Fairfax) x Redrich (Fairfax x Wayzata)] an everbearing variety introduced by the N.Y. Agr. Exp. Station at Geneva in 1961, is one of the best in quality; but the berries are very soft, and runner plants are not produced freely.

**N.Y. 1144** (Raritan x N.Y. 844 (N.Y. 254 x Redglow)), selected in 1965, is the latest member of this very select group of best-flavored strawberries. Its perfumed flavor is very distinct, and we consider it among the best. The berries are large, very attractive and usually firm. The fruit freezes well and is less susceptible to fruit rot than most varieties. Plant vigor and crops are satisfactory. This selection will be named and released as soon as a sufficient quantity of plants is available.

**Marshall** is a chance seedling from Massachusetts which was introduced in 1893. This old variety, still grown in the Northwest, was once widely grown in the Northeast. It was, and still is, one of the best flavored varieties. It is esteemed for preserving and freezing; but the berries are too soft for market.

**Hovey**, the first named variety of any fruit to be produced in America by planned breeding, was selected in Massachusetts in 1834. C. M. Hovey, its originator, described it as "abounding with a most agreeable acid and exceedingly high flavored juice. Not surpassed by any variety." It was a standard variety until 1880 and was listed in the Fruit Catalogue of the American Pomological Society from 1852 to 1897. One of its seedlings, President Wilder, included in the Fruit Catalogue from 1869-1897, was valued by amateurs for its superior quality.

Suwannee, Fairfax, Marshall and N.Y. 1144 each have a very distinct flavor. They are unlike the wild strawberry of eastern North America, which has long been appreciated for its fine flavor. For the home garden or roadside market, these varieties, including Fletcher, are the most rewarding in flavor.