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'Sweet Charlie' Strawberry

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'Sweet Charlie' strawberry, a short-day genotype released by the University of Florida in 1992 (2), was an important commercial cultivar in west central Florida for about 10 years. Its release had an immediate impact on the Florida industry. Because of its high early season yields of flavorful fruit, Florida growers were able to more fully exploit the late November through February market window. The percentage of the Florida acreage planted in 'Sweet Charlie' rose from 5% of the total strawberry acreage in the 1992-93 season to about 50% of the total strawberry acreage in the 1998-99 season. Concurrently, from 1991 to 1998 the average price per 12-pint flat rose from $8.00 to $12.00, acreage rose from 5,400 acres to 6,200 acres, and the total value of the crop rose from $109 million to $161 million (4)

Plant pathologist Charles M. (Charlie) Howard was involved in the initial stage of development of this cultivar, and the cultivar was named in his honor. 'Sweet Charlie' was selected in 1986 from the progeny of a cross between FL 80-456 and 'Pajaro' (1).

Primary fruit are usually wedge-shaped; secondary and later fruit are conical to wedge-shaped. External fruit color is orange-red; internal color is orange streaked with white. The calyx is large, with 1.5 to 2.5 cm long, coarsely serrated lobes. Leaflets are generally cupped, which on casual observation might be confused with symptoms of powdery mildew – when in fact 'Sweet Charlie' leaves are not particularly susceptible to this disease.

'Sweet Charlie' is currently of minor importance in west central Florida because its fruit are less firm and more susceptible to *Botrytis* fruit rot than the fruit of some newer cultivars, but it is still grown in areas where earliness and flavor are valued and fruit will be consumed locally. In the U.S., it is grown as far north as Tennessee and North Carolina. Internationally, it is grown commercially in numerous production areas. Egypt still grows 'Sweet Charlie' to produce fruit in November and December for export to the UK and Germany, while significant acreages of 'Sweet Charlie' are reportedly in India, China, and Mexico to produced fruit for domestic consumption (Roy Ekland of Ekland Marketing Company of California, personal communication). In central and south America, 'Sweet Charlie' continues to be grown because of its resistance to diseases caused by *Colletotrichum acutatum*. In west central Florida, 'Sweet Charlie' is field immune to anthracnose fruit rot and resistant to *Colletotrichum* crown and root necrosis, diseases that have been difficult to control with fungicides.

'Sweet Charlie' can have relatively high soluble solids levels in its fruit early in the season, with lower levels during the peak of production (3). What is more characteristic of 'Sweet Charlie' fruit, however, is its low acidity. In addition to a desirable sugar to acid ratio, ripe 'Sweet Charlie' fruit can have aromatic qualities reminiscent of cotton candy.

Literature Cited

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