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PRE-REGISTER BY NOV. 30 FOR NEW ENGLAND VEG. & FRUIT CONFERENCE

The 2009 New England Vegetable & Fruit Conference (NEVFC) and Trade Show will take place December 15-

How much mulch should be applied? A traditional, level matted row planting will require 2.5 to 3 tons of straw per acre for a 2 to 3 inch deep mulch, or about 300 small bales of average weight. Raised bed plantings and sites with strong wind may require twice this amount for adequate coverage. How is the mulch applied? Smaller plantings may be mulched by hand by shaking out the bales of straw over the row. Larger plantings often use bale choppers to break up the straw bales and distribute the straw over the bed. Choppers are available for both small bales and large round bales.

How and when is the much removed? In the spring, when plants begin to show growth under the winter mulch (new green tissue), the mulch should be raked off the rows to allow sunlight to penetrate and reach the foliage. Delaying removal will delay plant growth and flowering and may reduce yield. Mulch can be raked off by hand with ordinary yard rakes in smaller plantings. In larger plantings, various mechanical tools are available ranging from modified hay rakes and tedders to equipment specifically designed for the purpose.

Floating row covers as mulch. These covers are composed of a plastic such as polypropylene, spunbonded into a fabric that is permeable to light, air, and water. Research and growers' experiences demonstrate that these covers are useful for winter protection of strawberry plantings. While floating row covers are available in several weights, only the heavier weights are recommended for winter protection. At present a widely available weight recommended for winter strawberry protection is 1.25 oz/yd2 (42 g/m2). A variety of fabric widths are available, with common widths ranging from 15 feet Track the progression of ground temperatures, noting when time where soil temperatures are running at 40°F over several consecutive days. You should apply your mulch prior to the ground freezing.

Straw remains the mulching material of choice on strawberries. Wheat, rye, Sudangrass, barley and oat straws work well (and my preference is in the same order). But clean straw is essential! If your primary criterion is the price per bale, then you are inviting trouble! If possible, examine the straw for its grain or weed seed contamination before you buy it, and certainly before you apply it! Don't import headaches that might largely be avoided with just a little extra care. If need be, it is preferable to grow it yourself or to have it contract-grown so that you can closely control or monitor its cutting time. (Cut before the seed is viable!) It is no bargain to use seed-contaminated straw, as you will surely pay for the hidden extras in herbicides, cultivation, labor and headache.

There are plenty of reasons to mulch strawberries adequately. Unprotected strawberry plants are very vulnerable to desiccation