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CORNELL RELEASES TWO NEW STRAWBERRIES

By Linda McCandless

GENEVA, NY: To get the luscious strawberries that consumers want, fruit growers baby their plants. To get the same luscious fruit, strawberry breeder Courtney Weber could be accused of beating his.

"I encourage diseases and insects to do their worst," says Weber, the Cornell University horticultural scientist who directs the small fruit breeding program at the New York State Agricultural Experiment Station in Geneva, NY. "That way, when a new selection is finally released, growers can be assured their results will be even better than mine."

Weber officially released two new strawberries last week, and named them after his favorite authors, L'Amour and Clancy.

"Common geographic names and anything remotely related to the color red have been used for other varieties," says Weber. He thought it would be easier for people to recognize new strawberry releases from Cornell if he changed to a new naming scheme. Strawberries with easy-to-remember names like King, Herriott, Steinbeck, Orwell, Twain, Cussler, and Crichton are already in the pipeline. "No endorsement by the authors is intended or suggested," he notes.

Weber is reinvigorating a breeding program that has not released a strawberry since 1991. He currently has two acres of strawberries—about 11,000 seedlings—undergoing testing and evaluation. Most breeders are doing well if they get a new variety out of every 10,000 to 15,000 plants.

"Growers look for new varieties that fill a niche in the wholesale, retail, or pick-your-own markets," says Weber. "They want good eating quality, with a decent shelf life, on a plant that holds its own in the field against the weather, the bugs and the diseases. They want berries that appeal to consumers and contribute to the bottom line."

Developing a new strawberry variety can take 10 to 15 years. Berry, apple, grape, and stone fruit breeders at the Experiment Station select for yield, flavor, winter hardiness, insect and disease resistance, and vigor. They



Small fruit breeder Courtney Weber shown here among his 11,000 test seedlings, released 2 varieties of strawberries from his breeding program—the first since 1991.



The new 'Clancy' strawberry



The new 'L'Amour' strawberry

have introduced 245 new fruit varieties since the Station's founding in 1880; 38 have been strawberries.

What L'Amour and Clancy Have to Offer

The fruit eating quality and flavor of L'Amour is very good, notes Weber. It fits well in the market currently served by Honeoye, a Station variety that was introduced in 1979. L'Amour was tested as NY 1829. A bright red, early-June-bearing hybrid of (MDUS5252 x Etna) x Cavendish, it is attractively long and conical, firm but not hard, with good winter hardiness and vigor. It was first selected for testing in 1994.

Clancy is darker red than L'Amour, bears in late June, and is a hybrid seedling of MDUS4774 x MDUS5199. It fruits after Jewel, in a late-season market that traditionally has been hard to fill because it is difficult to get a good eating berry that stays firm and holds up to hot weather. Clancy holds its berries high off the ground. This makes them less susceptible to the fungal diseases that usually attack late-season crops. Clancy was tested as NYUS304B, and has good eating quality. It was developed in conjunction with the USDA strawberry-breeding program in Beltsville, MD, and first selected from a cross made in 1988.

Virus Testing is Key

In the Geneva small fruit program, strawberries are developed by conventional plant breeding techniques, in a process of trial and error that requires great patience. Promising new varieties are selected, numbered, and crossed with each other. Data is kept on thousands of seedlings, selections, and varieties.

New technology has not shortened the release process, but it does insure higher quality nursery stock. Virus elimination—a fairly recent technological advance made possible through tissue culture and ELISA testing—means growers have access to virus-free stock, so they can plant virus-free fields of new varieties and not introduce diseases onto their farms.

Clancy and L'Amour were selected for release years ago. But it takes a long time for plants to be tested as virus-free, and then to propagate enough virus-free material to meet the increased demand when a new release is named.

Both berries will be available to commercial and backyard growers in limited test quantities for 2004, and in larger quantities in 2005, through Nourse Farms, Indiana Berry & Plant Company, and StrawberryTyme Farms.

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