

# As weather shifts, strawberries leave sour taste in northeast India



Strawberries are pictured in this

Strawberries are a treat for many, but they are increasingly leaving a sour taste in the mouths of growers in Meghalaya, in India's northeast.

The state, with just under 3 million people, is the third largest producer of strawberries in India, its government says. On average, about 500 metric tonnes of the fragile fruit is grown each year on 1,500 hectares (3,700 acres) of land.

The berries were introduced in the late 1990s by a few farmers and enthusiastically adopted by others, who saw their farm profits soar, growers say. One described growing the high-value crop as like winning the lottery.

But today the fruits of that windfall – new homes, televisions and big bank savings balances – are under threat, like the crop itself, as weather conditions shift.

Increasingly erratic rainfall has led to the spread of fungal diseases in the berries, and much hotter temperatures have cut into production over the last three years, farmers say.

The changes, linked to climate shifts, have led farmers to consider giving up their once-favourite crop, or trying to move to locations more favourable for growing the fruit.

"In the last few years, the temperature has crossed 30 degrees Celsius, and this is creating a lot of problems for the strawberry growers here," said Ostander Lyngkhoi, a pioneering strawberry farmer and the head of Sohliya village, one of the hubs of strawberry cultivation.

His four-acre patch had previously earned him enough money to build a house for his family, buy a vehicle and save the equivalent of more than \$3,000, he said.

## LOST INVESTMENT?

The weather changes also threaten years of efforts to build a thriving strawberry production and marketing system in the region, with the help of the Indian Institute of Entrepreneurship (IIE).

Until the weather changed, "it worked really well. The strawberries were sent to different parts of the country and were even exported to Bangladesh," said Hemanta Rabha, an IIE official.

The IIE and growers also financed the building of a high-tech nursery for strawberry seedlings in 2012, at a cost of around 1.5 million Indian rupees (\$23,000).

With shifting weather patterns, including early heavy rains and some hail, the established system of planting in September and harvesting around April is leading to growing crop damage, Rabha said.

"The weather has become erratic and in the last few years we have almost continuously had pre-monsoon showers," said Sangar Sangma, of the Meghalaya-based Centre for Environment Protection and Rural Development.

Strawberry production has fallen sharply over the past three years. Last year Meghalaya produced under 200 tonnes, less than half the annual average for the state, officials said.

After suffering three years of losses, "I am worried about the future," admitted Lyngkhoi.

## INSURANCE, MIGRATION COULD HELP

Growers do not have access to crop insurance, according to Sangma, and so do not receive any compensation for the damages. The state government says it plans to introduce policies against crop failures soon.

Rabha said some farmers have already started to move their crops to cooler areas. But "migrating to a new place will be very expensive," warned Aslia Marak, one grower from Darechikgre village, in the West Garo Hills district.

The harsher weather also has hit production of strawberry plants at the Sohliya nursery, forcing many growers to import plants from California. However, a large number of those have been damaged by heat, farmers said.

The growers are exploring moving the local nursery to a cooler area at Kynshi, nearly 100 kilometres (63 miles) away, Lynghoi said.

Meanwhile Veerendra Verma, a scientist at the Indian Council for Agriculture Research, advises growers to plant earlier in the season to avoid high temperatures at the time the strawberry plants flower.

“There are newer varieties of strawberry which are tolerant to wider climatic conditions and there could be tested for cultivation here,” he said.

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