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Nature Fresh's Berry Plans

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Strawberries continue to be a growth category for indoor production, both in vertical farms and greenhouses. I recently caught up with Matt Quiring, senior vice president of sales for Nature Fresh Farms, to find out more details about expansion plans at the Delta, Ohio, growing range that are exclusively strawberry-focused.

Currently there are 45 acres in production right now in Delta for conventionally grown tomatoes and the goal is to construct 45 more acres in one build over the next year to begin strawberry production mid-October 2023, Matt says.

Pictured: Matt Quiring, senior vice president of sales for Nature Fresh Farms.

"We decided we wanted to move forward with the build in Ohio for a number of reasons. Our team there is always eager to take on more and as a company we really believe in providing new advancement opportunities," Matt says, adding their research led them to determine organic strawberries were a growth opportunity due to lack of availability in the market, particularly once field production was done. "Over the past two years we really made an investment into starting to get into this berry category. We've seen demand levels continuing and interest levels from retailers continuing to increase. Greenhouse strawberries seem to be continuing to take off and see a ton of demand at retail."

They're currently working with retail partners to form commitments, and depending on the interest levels, the production right now is planned to be all organic, but depending on need could work out to be 30 acres organic and 15 conventional.

Matt notes their production will likely run from mid-October through mid-June, taking advantage of a brand new, fully LED-lit, automated high-tech growing space built by sister company South Essex Fabricating (he called it "the Tesla of greenhouses"). They're answering some of the pain points that supply chain and transportation issues have caused retailers by offering a local option for strawberries.

They're currently staffing up in anticipation of the expansion, and the goal is to employ somewhere between 150 and 250 more workers once the strawberry production comes online. That likely won't happen until next summer, as the land is being cleared now and construction will take place over the winter. Completion is anticipated roughly around May 2023, with production in full swing by October.

I asked what variety they're planning to grow and he says Albion is the one that ticked the boxes they needed, including for flavor profile and shelf life. It's also what they grow in 30 acres of greenhouse space in Leamington, Ontario, which saw expansion from 10 acres last year to 30 this year.

It might not be the only berry they end up growing, either. Matt says they're trialing raspberries at the R&D facility in Leamington and they plan to add blackberries to those trials in the future, as well. **IG**