

News

Strawberry crop makes a red-letter May



Valentine Low

"Doubtless God could have made a better berry," Dr William Butler, the 17th-century writer, once said of the strawberry, "but doubtless God never did."

This year might see some of His better efforts after the unseasonably warm weather has led to predictions of one of the best strawberry crops of recent years.

With April having been one of the sunniest on record, the combination of warm days and cool nights has produced a bumper yield of "excellent-tasting berries", according to the in-

dustrial body British Summer Fruits. They are not only tastier and more plentiful, they are also earlier. Berries have been produced by the industry's most northerly UK commercial grower, in Montrose, Scotland, earlier than ever before.

Today marks the start of the British strawberry season, with more than 50 per cent of berries sold in supermarkets next week expected to be British, increasing to 100 per cent by late May, the BSF said (although anyone who knows anything recognises that one should not eat strawberries before the Chelsea Flower Show).

British strawberry production has been rising steadily in recent years to match

conditions have been fantastic. And without a shadow of a doubt, if you have sunshine you end up with nice sweet fruit.

The fine spring weather has also made last month one of the hottest in the last century.

Across England and Wales there was an average of 222 hours of sunshine, said the weather historian Philip Eden — 42 per cent more than the average for 1971-2000.

"Although the first few days were changeable and rather cold, and the last few days were changeable and rather warm, the centrepiece of April's weather was a long period of dry and sunny weather with high pressure in charge," he said. Last month was also very dry, said the Met Office, with East Anglia receiving only 10.1mm of rain — five times less than normal. Britain averaged 40.5mm, down more than 40 per cent on usual April weather, with England averaging just 19.1mm — 67 per cent less than normal.

The driest April recorded in the UK was in 1938, with only 14.1mm.

Barry Grommet, a Met Office spokesman, said: "This April has been much sunnier than normal, with temperatures up."

"It's been caused by high pressure over the Atlantic blocking weather systems and pushing them farther north to us."

"It has been an extension of the weather pattern which gave us the cold winter — a similar block giving us easterly and north-easterly winds for an extended period, which meant it was cold and dry."

Sunshine will be in short supply over the Bank Holiday weekend, however. Today is expected to be wet and cool, with Sunday similar.

"Monday offers the best chance of all of us, dry with variable amounts of cloud," said Mr Grommet. "Temperatures will be no more than 13 or 14C but with decent spells of sunshine."

5th

sunniest April in 100 years was last month

Source: Philip Eden, weather historian

increased demand. Laurence Ollins, the BSF chairman, said that he expected this year's production to be 6-7 per cent higher than last year's record figure.

"We predict this will be another strong season which has been boosted by the recent warm weather," he said.

"The warm weather has come just in time. The competitive fruit from Spain has come to a pretty rapid end. They have had a terrible time through the winter because of the rain there, and their quality has been indifferent. But we are not able to match demand — fruit is short. We are only just starting to crank up."

Jan Naerebout, operations director with S&A Produce, Britain's largest strawberry grower, said: "The crop is looking fantastic. If you were to look at our field now, it is one big flower garden. We are going to have our first small pick-on Tuesday. The last two weeks' growing

BANK HOLIDAY OFFERS

UP TO

30%