

And then there's the obvious attraction of picking your own strawberries directly from a farmer's field. A couple hours spent out in the country picking strawberries directly from the plant (and perhaps eating a few along the way) is a great outing for a young family and is sure to create some fond memories. It's more popular than ever: agri-tourism is growing rapidly, with strawberry picking being one of the leading reasons behind the recent surge.

Residents of Halton Hills are lucky to have a couple pick-your-own farms to choose from, foremost among them Andrew's Scenic Acres and nearby Milton's Springridge Farms (until recently, Allison's Farm Market in Georgetown offered strawberry picking, but now just sell freshly-harvested berries).

Strawberries can also be found at the Acton and Georgetown Farmers' Markets.

"Strawberries ripen in June and July. The last couple of years the season started around June 20, but we may be two or three weeks earlier than normal this year because of the warm spring," says Bert Andrews, whose farm has 35 acres devoted to cultivating strawberries, making it the largest pick-your-own farm in Halton.

"The (July 1) Canada Day Weekend is generally the peak. By then, we're half-way through the season."

Picking too early or too late in the season will be unrewarding; you'll get either unripe fruit or the undesirable leftovers. It's always a good idea to call the farm before you go to ensure they still have stock, and to verify hours of operation. Also, ask about containers. Some farms—like Andrew's Scenic Acres—provide baskets at a small fee, while others will insist you bring your own containers.

There's no doubt that picking strawberries directly from the field can make for an enjoyable time, but first-time pickers sometimes have their experience spoiled by not being prepared. Ideally, leave early in the day because fields can be picked clean by noon, especially on weekends. Also, be sure to dress appropriately.

"Strawberry farms are working farms, so you need appropriate footwear, such as running shoes or hiking shoes," says Bert Andrews. "Also, remember that you'll be out in an open field with the full weight of the sun beating down on you without any shade, so it's vital that you bring a hat and a drink so you remain hydrated."

There's no right or wrong way to pick strawberries, but there are certainly tips that experienced hands are aware of.

For example, when picking, always select plump, firm, fully red berries. Unlike many fruit, strawberries will not ripen once picked, so there is no point in taking unripe berries.

To get the best berries, get down low, push the leaves aside and look for fully-red berries. Taking the time to spread the foliage will often reward you with overlooked, ripened specimens.



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