

## Spain : 5,800 hectares of strawberries expected

After the planting of the earliest varieties, such as the San Andrea or Fortuna, about 50% of the 2016-2017 strawberry planting campaign has already been completed in the province of Huelva. This is the point at which local entrepreneurs will start planting the main native varieties, such as the Primoris, the Rabida, and the main novelty this year: the Rociera.

This was stated by the head of the Association of Producers and Exporters of Strawberries from Huelva (Freshuelva), Rafael Domínguez, who expects this initial period of the campaign to be fully completed across the province during the first week of November, "as long as no climatological setbacks are recorded."

Domínguez is confident that the temperatures and rains will be the usual ones for the autumn period. Something that, in his words, "is always positive, since high temperatures can cause stress to the plants," while lower ones allow the roots to become stronger.

However, it was recently announced that the forecast from the State Meteorological Agency (AEMET), points to a rather dry autumn, and that rain is very important at this time, especially to reduce the production costs, because if it doesn't happen naturally, growers have to resort to surface irrigation water, which increases costs, because it is water we have to pay for."

The planting stage kicked off in mid-October in the areas of Palos de la Frontera and Moguer, gradually spreading in the following weeks to other municipalities in the county and the West Coast.

Regarding the acreage planted with strawberries in the province of Huelva, the head of Freshuelva said that it is still too early to have any definitive data, "We need to wait until after the planting, but all seems to point to it being in line with last year's figure (5,800 hectares), with the possibility of downward variation of no more than 4 or 5%."

Faced with this fact, Domínguez has pointed out that there has been an increase in the acreage planted with blueberries, although it is not yet possible to calculate the extent, because it is a plant that only yields its first commercial production in the third year after the planting.

Prospects also point to an increase in the acreage devoted to raspberries and a slight one in that planted with blackberries.

This trend, according to Domínguez, is in line with what Freshuelva has been promoting for the past three years, with the goal of achieving a greater "diversification" of the production so that Huelva's agricultural companies can supply the markets with a full package of the four berries: strawberries, blueberries, raspberries and blackberries.

The head of Freshuelva has also pointed out that between 4,000 and 5,000 people are working on the planting in all producing areas of the province, highlighting their high degree of specialization, with labourers "who are mostly part of the permanent workforce" of the companies.

In this regard, he pointed out that it has not been necessary to resort to hiring labour from third countries, as agreed last summer by the Commission for the Management of Migratory Flows. This, in fact, is the sixth consecutive year that this measure has been enforced.

Rafael Domínguez also stressed that if the weather conditions are suitable, the first strawberries will start being harvested around Christmas, compared to what happened last season, when the high temperatures during most of the autumn resulted in the first fruits arriving in early December.

Lastly, he stressed that the sector is facing the new campaign with the same hope and optimism as every year," and with the challenges of further strengthening Europe's perception of strawberries from Huelva as a quality product, "especially for the new varieties"; and of continuing to promote the nutritional values and health benefits of berries..

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