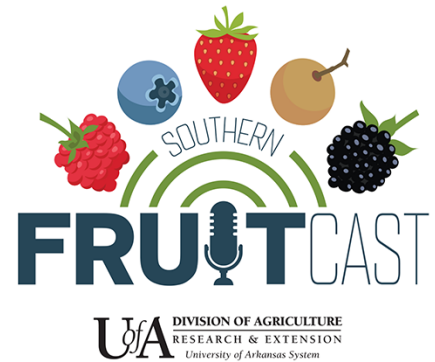


# The Southern Fruitcast

## *Episode 5: Farm-to-School Marketing and Strawberries with Randy Arnold*



**[Intro]** Thanks for tuning into the Southern Fruitcast. This podcast aims to cover the people, technology and latest developments in small fruit production in the Southeast. We are brought to you by the Southern Region Small Fruit Consortium and the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture.

**[Cato]** I'm Dr. Aaron Cato, extension specialist for Commercial Fruit and Vegetable IPM at the University of Arkansas.

**[McWhirt]** And I'm Dr. Amanda McWhirt, extension production specialist for fruits and vegetables, also at the University of Arkansas.

**[Cato]** Okay. So today we have with us Randy Arnold. How are you doing, Randy?

**[Arnold]** I'm doing great.

**[McWhirt]** We're glad to have you here today on our podcast, Randy.

**[Arnold]** Thank you. And I'm glad to be able to attend.

**[McWhirt]** So, Randy, we're going to give a quick introduction so that some of our listeners can get to know you a little bit better. So, Randy Arnold owns Arnold Family Farm in Alma, Arkansas, with his wife, Vickie. Together, they run a highly diverse farm and have farmed for over 20 years, and they currently grow strawberries, vegetables and raise cattle and poultry. And I think, Randy, you've told me that you harvest a little over 20,000 eggs a day. Is that right?

**[Arnold]** Yes.

**[McWhirt]** And so he stays very busy with his farming operation. And the Arnold Family Farm is well known in the area for their strawberry patch, which is an integral part of the community. The Arnold's market their berries through the roadside farm market to U-pick customers and through sales to local schools and a farm-to-school program. They also hold a yearly on-farm festival called Fun on the Farm that hosts a thousand students from area schools who visit the farm and learn about agriculture. Randy, we're really glad to have you here today to talk a little bit more about what you've learned in these last 20 years of farming and growing strawberries.

**[Arnold]** Well, every year is different.

**[Cato]** Well, we'll get in to specifically how this year has been a little different. But let's just start off with, you know, could you tell us a little bit about your farming operation? You know, more than a little bit more than Amanda just did.

**[Arnold]** Well, you know, we started with breeder hens where we collect fertilized eggs, go to the hatchery every day. And then 11 years ago, we saw a need for strawberries in our area. So we started out small there with a half-acre and then expanded to five acres of strawberries. And then we have - we'll grow - we've got pumpkins now and we got tomatoes and other vegetables during the summer.

**[McWhirt]** So tell us a little bit about how you've expanded on your strawberry production. So, you started out with, you said a quarter acre. And how much do you have now?

**[Arnold]** Well, we started out with a half-acre, and that's been recommended and that's what we tell everyone. Start small 'till you learn, you know, what you're doing because it's a very expensive start-up on the strawberries. And, you know, as we grew and learned what we were doing and expanded our market, we grew to five acres and which is somewhere around 60,000 plants.

**[McWhirt]** So when you were first starting off, were you marketing primarily as pick-your-own or how are you selling your berries?

**[Arnold]** We had some pick-your-own and then we just had a stand here on our farm and people would come and, you know, purchase from us.

**[McWhirt]** Right. And have you shifted at all over time in what, cultivars you are growing for your strawberries?

**[Arnold]** Yes. You know, you talk to other growers, what works for them. And we started out with, you know, some Chandlers and some Camarosa and, you know, that worked pretty good for U-Pick and roadside. And as we grew, we got into more wholesale and selling to schools and, you know the varieties it works great for us would be the Camino Real because they have a better shelf life and they, you know, they last up into the warmer season. We also plant some Sweet Charlies that we have. You know, we'll have them early and for our customers before the Caminos come on. And then every year we try something new. This year we're trying some Fronteras. We heard they have a great taste and they might work on our farm with the U-Pick and some of the - through our store.

**[McWhirt]** Yeah, that's great.

**[Cato]** So Randy, just to expand a bit more on this year, could you tell us how COVID-19 affected your operation and market sources this year?

**[Arnold]** Yes. Let me step back a little bit here and how the weather affected it first. With hail on Easter to freezes, you know, early in the year, kind of set us back. The demand for strawberries was great. We had no problem getting rid of 'em. Our U-Pick - we never experienced anything

like we had this year. We opened one day and had to try to close by noon. We had 300 people show up, so we were just not prepared for that. People were looking for something to do. So after that, with not the best of berries this year production-wise, we just really never opened our U-Pick again.

**[McWhirt]** Hmm.

**[Arnold]** And as far as next year, we'll have to see, you know, how what kind of season we're going to have. And then we might have to go to a reservation to come out and pick, you know, so make sure everyone has berries to pick. And if you're not overrun with people.

**[Cato]** So, whenever you got that hail damage and those berries, did you just - was it just a total loss on those that were able to sell those? Did they end up going through maturity where people would buy them or what?

**[Arnold]** We were able to sell a lot of them. What it did, it hurt the plants, you know, like to knock some blooms off. So it set us back for about three weeks on some. But the berries that did survive, we were able to sell. They did have some scars on them, but the demand for berries was so great, you know, it didn't seem like it, you know, it hurt the sale of them. It was just that we lost pretty well lost three weeks there at the first of the season when we didn't have many berries.

**[Cato]** Yeah. I think even the peach growers kind of near you had the same thing occur where we saw them early in the year. They were scared about all the hail damage and then people just bought 'em. They didn't, you know, they stopped caring as much because they just wanted some fruit. You mentioned that you do a farm-to-school program, so that's one of your markets or sources. Could you tell us a little bit more about that?

**[Arnold]** Yes. Strawberries, like a lot of crops will start slow. And then you have a two or three week period right in the middle that you're just covered with berries and you need to market. And how I really got started, there was a lady from Boonville School, saw my ad in the paper and she called me and wanted to know if she could - if I could sell her some berries to the schools and I did. And she's helped me out a lot with other schools and the nutritionist and then I just start getting on the phone after I learn and starts calling schools, you know, "[I] got berries. It's great for the school lunch program. Are you interested in it?" And I'd have to try to educate them on how they do purchase because a lot of them didn't know at the time. But since then, the Department of Agriculture has hired a person, Sarah, that goes around and helps the schools to learn how to purchase from local farmers and what to purchase and how. But, you know, I just sit down one day and start calling and asking them for the school nutritionist and, you know, start talking to them. And as of right now, I have 14 schools I was selling to. I think it's great for, you know, the kids in school to learn that, you know, that what they're eating is locally grown. I've actually went to a few schools and spoke on, ya know, locally grown - I mean, I think in the federal schools, they have a sign up where the strawberries come from, you know, it's for

local. So, you know, it's teaching our youth that, you know, locally grown products, you know, is a good thing.

**[McWhirt]** So do you know how they're using the strawberries when they buy from you, Randy? Are they just serving the product fresh or are they doing any processing?

**[Arnold]** Right now, most of them are just serving fresh that I'm aware of. Uh, you know, they just cap 'em, wash 'em, maybe cut them in two and serve them fresh. I have talked with a few schools that may be in the future - that since we have a licensed facility that I can freeze berries and sell it to them later in the year. And so there's a few schools that have shown interest in that.

**[McWhirt]** Yeah. Have you heard anything from the schools as far as having to do that kind of processing stuff, even if it is a fresh product of having to wash and cut? Do they have any problems with that or is that something that they're already doing with other things on their menu?

**[Arnold]** That is something that they're doing already with other products.

**[Cato]** So are there any like other schools that you so you said, I think you said, 16 schools that you work with. Are there any that you weren't open to that idea or they've all been pretty open to, you know, buying strawberries from a local source like that?

**[Arnold]** Well, they were all interested in it. And then, you know, I might have on to call another, nutritionist and talk to them, see how they're doing it. And then, of course, they always had to get permission from the schools to be able to do it. But it's come a long way and there's a lot more schools, especially your smaller, mid-sized schools. Some schools only buy from vendors and don't buy, you know, locally and all unless you sell through the vendor. But federal schools is big on locally purchased, locally grown items, and they'll even buy stuff in the summer and their cafeteria will process it to use during the year - later in the year. So they are a good source to, you know, have someone call and see what's going on. But with the Department of Ag putting on different classes and all and helping to, you know, show what value it is to the schools and to the local farmers.

**[Cato]** Have you seen any interest in other small fruits like blackberries or blueberries or anything like that? Do you think they fit in at all to the system?

**[Arnold]** It does but why strawberries fit so well, school is still in session. Where blackberries and blueberries - I do sell some blueberries to school for summer school projects, but not as big a volume as you would your strawberries, because, you know, there's not many in the summer school program. So that's why strawberries fits in real well. It's because it's during school time and they can use them right then. I think, you know, maybe apples in the fall works well. And that's one of the tricky things about selling the schools is - you've got to have something, you know, when schools in session to sell them, unless they're able to process them or you're able to process them or whatever and then sell to them.

**[McWhirt]** Well, Aaron if you don't have any more questions about farm-to-school, we might pivot a little bit. Randy. I think it's great that you kind of have this very diverse marketing strategy where you're, you know, selling a little bit to direct to the consumer where they're coming out and picking. But you also have these other markets seems like it makes it easier for you to be able to pivot when something like this happens with COVID, where, you know, one of your markets, like the schools, is suddenly no longer available, but you still have these other options.

**[Arnold]** Yeah, strawberries do not have a shelf life, so you have to move the berries.

**[McWhirt]** Right. Well, the one other thing that we wanted to talk to you a little bit about is this other program that you run on your farm, and it's the Fun on the Farm program. Can you tell us a little bit about the history of that program and how you got it started?

**[Arnold]** Yes, it was through our Extension office, I don't know - eight or nine years ago? And they were interested in putting something on in the county. And basically we just kind of use our farm for it and the Extension Service puts it together. And then we have, you know, all kinds of volunteers, you know, Bureau, Farm Credit. Oh, and, you know, the Forest Service, the Dairy and all that comes out and helps with it and all. And we started with a half a day and it's grown to three days. And like you say, somewhere around 900 to 1000 students plus parents come out. And those three days and we'll have like seven different stations that they rotate to get to pick berries and. Oh, you know, Smokey the Bear is usually here and the Forest Service. We have the fake milk cow. They learn, you know, about that. They have a beef station. Learns all that comes out of beef. We have a beekeeper here. And he, you know, they really enjoy that – see the bees. And he talks about that. Oh, I say different stations. You know I have a cow and a calf put up, my horse in the lot or something for them to look at. But it's been a really big success. But three days, that's enough. A lot of the help or most of it, we have volunteers, but a lot of it is your FFA or your 4-H students. They're able to come out and volunteer that, you know, they lead the tours. We still have the adults here and all. But, you know - it's a great success. We were not able to have it this year because of the virus and we miss that. But, you know, it's just a great deal. The parents, you know, they learn a lot too, uh, on things, you know, how things are grown and some things they might not know. But it's actually nine years, ten years I believe it's been going on. So it's been a real success. And, you know, even with the children out here and then they may come back next week or so with their parents that weren't able to come to pick strawberries, you know, and they're I was telling them, you know, don't pick the white flowers because that is a berry in 21 days or so, you know, or whatever it is – and my mind's gone today. But yeah. On that. So, so you know, you know, they know that too. So, and we, you know -they were able to go away with some knowledge about agriculture and have a good time too.

**[McWhirt]** Yeah. No, that sounds like a great program to really get kids involved and have a better understanding of, like you say, just all different aspects of agriculture. And then also get people to aware that your farm is out there and that you're growing strawberries, um, because you do the Fun on the Farm around strawberry season?

**[Arnold]** Yes, we do it during strawberry season. So one of the, the seven stations is, uh, they get to pick strawberries and we give them a little container thing, put them in and take back to school with them or home. So, you know, and if it's, you know, strawberries come on different times, sometimes, uh, middle of April, towards the end it is depends on, on the weather. And there's been one or two years that the berries wasn't ready to pick when they came out. We were still able to show them, but most years they can pick berries and take them back home with them.

**[McWhirt]** That's great.

**[Cato]** Yeah. Especially for that area where, you know, it's more of a cattle or a little bit more row crop once you get into the valley. So you kind of see more of the specialty crop, especially fruits is like really, really important, you know, near the Fort Smith area.

**[Arnold]** Yes. Yeah. And then we were before able to take them into the chicken houses. We cannot do that anymore. And so but we will have some out here and tell him, you know, that I explained to him that the roosters, the chickens and, you know, there's where the 21 days comes in for hatching an egg, you know, to, you know, to become a chick. And, you know, they learn some things about that. So we just try to cover a lot of areas. It might interest them in a hurry for them. And it's been great. We get responses back from the teachers, you know, feedback from them. And, you know, it's great. You know, we just hopefully this year we can continue.

**[McWhirt]** No, I'm sure it's a lot of effort on your part. A really nice thing for the community.

**[Arnold]** Yeah, we enjoy it. And like I say, it is a lot of work, but we do enjoy it. See the, uh, the kids and even the parents have fun and make sure that we have a lot of volunteers that help. So that makes it. And we are still picking strawberries and doing our work and the eggs and all while this is going on. So.

**[McWhirt]** Well, Randy, I think we're going to wrap it up with just one last question. So, you've been growing strawberries for a while now. What advice would you offer to new growers wanting to start a farm - particularly keeping in mind that you might want to have some kind of large community focus, such as what you all are doing?

**[Arnold]** Well, like I mentioned before: start small, you know, start small where you know, you know, get a feel of what you're doing because I'd hate for someone jump out large and have a bad year the first year and it, you know, can hardly overcome it. See what your community needs, too. What you know, what needs to be grown, what, you know, maybe blueberries or something. You know, that kind in your area – or strawberries. You know, the more of the farm agri-tourism – the agri-tourism is, you know, really come in popular.

**[McWhirt]** Mm hmm.

**[Arnold]** And so, you know, you might go that route, but, you know, start small and then build on it, you know, over the years.

**[McWhirt]** Well, thanks so much for joining us here on our podcast, the Southern Fruitcast. Randy, we really appreciate you taking the time out. I know it's starting to get busy because you're - you mentioned that you're going to be laying plastic here in the next week as soon as it dries out for your fall planting of strawberries. So we appreciate your time.

**[Cato]** Thanks, Randy.

**[Arnold]** Thank you.

**[Out – Cato]** Thanks for tuning into the Southern Fruitcast. Our episodes are hosted by PodBean and also can be accessed on the University of Arkansas extension website at [uada.uaex.edu/southernfruitcast](http://uada.uaex.edu/southernfruitcast). Here you can see all of our episodes and provide us feedback to help shape future episodes of this podcast.

**[Out – McWhirt]** We'd again like to thank the Southern Region Small Fruit Consortium for funding this podcast. The consortium provides a large library of production and Integrated Pest Management resources at [smallfruits.org](http://smallfruits.org). We'll be back again soon with more updates on the Southeast small fruit industry and interviews with specialist, researchers, and farmers from across the region.