

Strawberry Farming on Vashon

By Bruce Haulman and Terry Donnelly

Echoing Clara Peller's famous statement in Wendy's commercial from the 1980s, "Where's the beef?", Islanders have been asked as we celebrate the annual Vashon Island Strawberry Festival, "Where's the strawberries?" At one time the answer was easy. They were everywhere. But the story of strawberry farming on Vashon-Maury Island is a story of great success, a long lingering decline, a period of absence, and the beginnings of a revival.

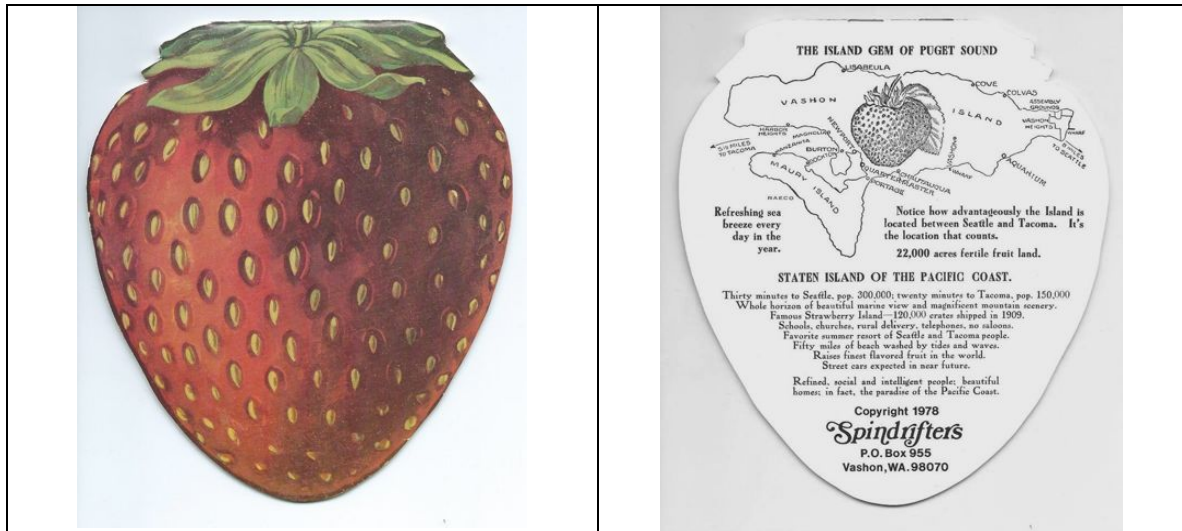
The first commercially grown strawberries on Vashon were probably those grown by John Cage Gorsuch in the early 1890s at his farm just north of Vashon Town where Gorsuch road is now. This 1893 photograph shows his strawberry farm with amazingly well dressed pickers to our modern sensibilities. In 1896, Gorsuch grew 6,120 pounds of strawberries on each of his 3 acres with an average price \$1.40 per 24-pound crate for a return of \$357 per acre. Which in 2014 dollars equates to about \$9,600 per acre.



Gorsuch Strawberry Farm 1893, Oliver Van Olinda
courtesy University of Washington Libraries, Digital Collection

The sandy loamy soils of Vashon-Maury Island are well adapted to strawberries, as Karen Dale has noted in *Garden On, Vashon!* With the Island's mild temperature and ready access to marine transportation, strawberries quickly became an important crop and in 1909 John Reed, the publisher of the Vashon Island News, printed a strawberry-shaped promotional brochure that proclaimed Vashon as the "Home of the Big Red Strawberry" and "The Island Gem of the Pacific Coast." The map of the Island, seen in the Spindrift 1978 reproduction

of this 1909 booklet, shows Vashon with a large strawberry prominently centered on the Island.



“Island of the Big Red Strawberry” courtesy of Spindrifters © 1978

Vashon quickly became known for its strawberries. Vashon Strawberries won First Place at the 1909 Valley Fair in Puyallup. The 1911 *Seattle Republican* newspaper declared, “Vashon Island is the greatest strawberry growing section of the State of Washington.” And in 1912 it was estimated that Vashon would ship 100 rail cars of strawberries. Also in 1912, the Burton Fair advertised “Eat 20 miles of strawberries” as 1,800 visitors came to the Island to visit the strawberry farms. Vashon strawberries continued to be celebrated at various Strawberry Festivals at Burton, Vashon, and Ellisport. During the 1924 Strawberry festival at Ellisport over 2,500 visitors came to the Island. And, in 1923, 101-year-old Melissa Jaynes was crowned Vashon’s First Strawberry Queen.

During the 1910s and 1920s, Japanese farmers began to immigrate to Vashon to farm strawberries. Although Japanese immigrants were prohibited from buying land by restrictive laws that culminated in the 1921 Washington State Anti-Japanese Land Act, which was not repealed until 1968, land was relatively inexpensive to lease or rent, and strawberry farms did not require large acreages to be successful and profitable. The Japanese farmers came to dominate strawberry farming on Vashon, but there were many non-Japanese who continued to grow strawberries on Vashon, on Maury, and in Dockton.

At the center of this success for Vashon strawberries was the once famous Marshall strawberry. The Marshall was described by food writer James Beard as the “tastiest berry ever grown.” It was a great berry for local consumption and for cold packing for use in jams and preserves, but it was a delicate strawberry, that had a very limited shelf life, and it was so easily bruised it was not suitable for shipping. As groceries developed fresh produce sections and demanded pretty

fruit with a longer shelf life, the Marshall strawberry dropped out of use in favor of more robust but less flavorful strawberries.



The Marshall Strawberry courtesy of VIGA

During the thirty years after World War II, many factors sent Vashon strawberry farming into decline: inexpensive refrigeration, inexpensive shipping by truck over the new Interstate Highway System, revised labor laws that no longer allowed children under 12 to pick berries, legislation to improve housing for migrant workers, and larger corporate type farms developing in California and Florida. Vashon strawberry farmers found they could no longer compete. By the mid-1980s Vashon strawberry farming had come to an end.

Masa Mukai stopped growing strawberries in 1949 but continued to operate the Cold Process Fruit Barrelling Plant until 1969 when it closed. In the late 1960's Augie Takatsuka stopped growing strawberries and turned to other enterprises, mainly Christmas trees. Tok Otsuka continued to grow strawberries in 1979, but soon after changed to growing corn. Dockton farmers continued to grow strawberries into the 1960s and Fred Ernisee continued to farm where Island Lumber is today. Yoniechi Matsuda continued to grow strawberries into the early-1980s on his farm behind K2, the last of the large-scale commercial strawberries grown on Vashon. He planted his last crop of strawberries in the early 1980s and after his death in 1985 no more were harvested.



Matsuda strawberry pickers @ 1975
courtesy Vashon Heritage Museum

Since the mid-1980s' there has been no significant strawberry farming on Vashon. There have been some small attempts at local u-pick type operations as part of other crops, but essentially strawberry farming died on Vashon until recently. Today, the Marshall strawberry is being revived on Vashon. Patty Hieb and Hooper Havekotte purchased Helen Brocard's Dockton house where Helen had planted Marshall strawberries from the Plant Germ/Seed Repository in Corvallis, Oregon. Cindy Stockett found Marshalls at the Bainbridge Island Friends of Farmers and is carefully cultivating them. Patty and Cindy's are the only sizable patches of Marshalls being grown on the island. Patty has been selling plants at the Saturday Market, and Cindy is preparing hers to be replanted at the Landmarked Mukai Agricultural Complex.



Patty Hieb by Terry Donnelly

This year, for the first time in a generation, you can purchase Vashon strawberries from Sun Island Farm at the Saturday Market and at the Harbor Mercantile farm stand. For Strawberry Festival this weekend, you can find Marshall Strawberries for sale at the Vashon Island Grower's Association (VIGA) booth. The Vashon Marshall strawberry is back!

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