



# Speciality Growers AG NEWSLETTER

“PIVOTING” IN A SMALL FARM BUSINESS: Q & A WITH CATHY LAFRENZ,  
OWNER/OPERATOR OF MISS EFFIE’S COUNTRY FLOWERS & GARDEN STUFF

Cathy Lafrenz started Miss Effie’s Country Flowers and Garden Stuff in Donahue, IA in 2002. Cathy and her husband built a beautiful You-Pick-Flower business. She has added value-added products such as cooking classes, homemade jams, and knitting products. I had the pleasure of listening to her speak at the Women in Agriculture Conference in Rock Island, IL about “pivoting” in a farm business. Having been in business for over 20 years, Cathy had some very practical information and tips for farmers. If you are interested in following, visiting, or talking to Cathy directly her contact information and social media sites are listed at the end of the article.

**Q.** Can you please provide a brief overview of your background and the story behind how “Miss Effie’s Country Flowers” came to be?

**A.** I started the farm in 2002. We had gone through 3 plant closures and wanted to be responsible for at least a portion of our own income. We had 1.75 acres. We made the decision to grow flowers because there was a lot of room in America’s floral industry for growth. The income potential was \$25-40,000 per acre. And the bottom line ... flowers make people happy. *(cont. pg. 2)*



## AUGUST 2023

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### FSB LOCATIONS

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## “PIVOTING” IN A SMALL FARM BUSINESS (CONT.)

**Q.** Your talk at the Women in Ag Conference was about “pivoting”? We often talk to our customers about that, but we often say, “making adjustments as needed”. Can you share some of your tips and/or stories about knowing when it’s time to pivot and the best way to do it? How do you know when to “Pivot”?

**A.** To me, pivoting is the ability to make constructive changes without altering the stated principles of your original business plan.

I personally think a well-written business plan is essential. Doesn't have to be formal but well thought out. What will you grow? Who will you sell it to? How much money will you make?

I find that I pivot when a product or practice no longer brings me joy. Which is a really dumb way of stating it! But if a process is too difficult, how do you make it easier? If you are not making a profit, what expenses do you cut? If you can't sell a product, what can you replace it with?

You may also pivot with climate change with more 90° days which are not good for flowers. I now open earlier and close earlier in the day.

Life changes can also contribute to pivots. Since the death of my husband, I am open fewer hours so I can handle all the "life duties" that we used to share.

**Q.** What would you say is your biggest success and why? And if you are willing to share it, what was your biggest mistake and why?

**A.** My biggest success has been starting a you-pick flower farm when it was an unknown marketing opportunity. Other flower farmers thought customers would ruin my flowers. (Doesn't happen!) And other people said no one would drive down a gravel road to pick flowers. Today, a family came from London for the 11th year in a row!

My biggest failure was trying to do more than was physically possible for my husband and myself. We kept building beds, planting flowers, and we became overwhelmed. We missed our social life, but we were either too busy or too tired! We learned to scale back. And I still made money. Smaller is often better when it comes to small scale organic agriculture.

**Q.** What is the biggest obstacle that you face in your business today and what do you do to try to mitigate it?

**A.** My biggest obstacle is the large influx of new flower farmers in the last 3 years. It is really easy to be anxious about losing out on business to the new kid on the block. I focus my anxiety in a couple of ways.

1. I believe in community over competition. So, by working together we can split orders, refer customers, and share knowledge and frustrations. And those friends will help you out in the tough times.

2. If I am focusing on someone else's business, I am not focusing enough on my business. I need to stay in my lane and keep driving straight ahead.

3. I practice relationship marketing. I try hard to personally relate to my customers. I know their name (I may not always remember it until 3 am!!!), I remember what their favorite flowers are, and I sit down and talk to them.

Last night, a young gal came out to have her senior pictures taken here. She started coming when she was 2 and this is where she wanted them taken.

I love it when a customer tells me that this is their happy place.

When you show sincere interest in your customers, it is harder for them to go elsewhere. You have to become their friend.

**Q.** You do value added products such as cooking classes. Was that always your intention to do value added products outside of the flowers? Do you have any advice for farmers looking to add value to their farms?

**A.** Value-added products came very naturally. I made enough applesauce for my family. I still have apples. I will make and sell apple-pie jam.

The thing about value added products is to make them the best quality possible. I found that the demand was there. I would knit hats that were made of local handspun wool yarn, sell them for \$60-80, and I would sell out!

I always had a price range from \$5 to \$100. And products under \$20 always sold best, but a range of prices can show quality.

The most important point is to know your expenses and what is your profit margin. I sell jam for \$8/8 oz. jar. Much higher than most of my competitors. But I sell out easily. I do try to make my jams unique by making them a bit special. Caramel apple jam with brandy or Salted caramel peach jam. Cantaloupe jam is one of the most popular. This way I can easily justify a higher price point.

**Q.** Is there something you wish you would have known as a beginner farmer that you know now? Any mistakes beginner farms should avoid?

**A.** I started my business early in the digital age. I read books, studied at the libraries, and asked questions on Garden Web forums. Those people are still friends!

I see so many people in love with the idea of farming without understanding the risks. And for many novices the romantic notion of a farm is the draw without carefully considering the pitfalls. I would recommend going back to the basics and reading books. Take classes from reputable instructors. Join great organizations. Take a class on marketing. Then take another class on marketing. Know who your customer will be before you plant seeds or buy livestock.

### *Cathy Lafrenz*

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# COVER CROPS: STARTING SIMPLE

I often hear beginning farmers say that they're intimidated by cover crops. They want to improve soil health on their farm, but the sheer number of cover crops and all their different functions is overwhelming, and there's a fear that making a bad choice will lead to heartache down the road.

What's the solution, then? Cover crops are one of the best tools we have at our disposal to provide ecosystem services to the farm. Starting simple, with a few well-characterized (and well-bred!) cover crops can help you build your confidence managing them. Whether your farm uses permanent beds, high tunnels, or raised beds, cover crops have a place and purpose.

## What's the best way to get started?

Build knowledge about some of our most common cover crop species. There are a few great resources listed at the end of the article to get you started. Be sure to read up on cereal rye, crimson clover, buckwheat, and radishes to start.

## What kinds of services do cover crops provide?

Even a winter-killing cover crop provides more ecosystem services than bare soil and weeds! Here are a few, followed by species that provide the service:

- Building organic matter – all; but grass species like cereal rye and sudangrass excel at this
- Fixing nitrogen – all legumes; crimson clover, hairy vetch, cowpea, and field pea excel at this
- Relieving compaction – taproot-forming brassicas; Daikon radish and turnip excel at this
- Preventing erosion – grass species; cereal rye, sudangrass, triticale, oats, and barley excel at this
- Suppressing weeds – many cover crops that grow thickly do well at this; buckwheat, sudangrass, cereal rye, and mustard are good choices
- Attracting pollinators – most non-grass cover crops will attract pollinators and other beneficial insects to the farm; buckwheat and crimson clover are two of the best at this

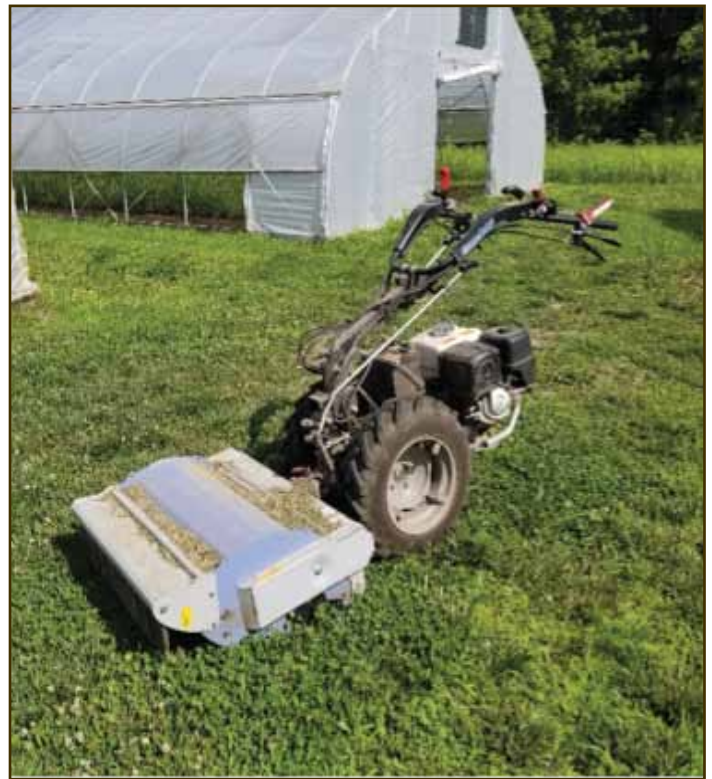
## Which cover crops should I try first?

A winter-killing cover crop is a good first step into the cover crop world, since you won't have to worry about the timing or equipment needed to terminate them. Try these in a vegetable bed that you plan to "rest" after a spring planting of early greens and root vegetables. You may also consider planting these in garlic or onion beds, since they are harvested during a suitable planting window for many winter-killing cover crops. Some choices to consider include buckwheat, cowpea, and radish.\*

\*Use caution when planting brassica cover crops on the small farm. If you rely on brassica crops like broccoli, cabbage, kale, and radish for revenue, make sure to only plant brassica cover crops in areas where you don't plan to rotate back into brassica cash crops for at least three years due to risk of transmitting *Xanthomonas*.



A bumblebee visits hairy vetch at the Purdue Student Farm.  
Photo by Ashley Adair



BCS 749 with Berta flail mower attachment.  
Photo by Ashley Adair.

## What equipment do I need to manage covers that don't winter-kill?

This depends on how physically strong you and your employees are. Cover crops can be managed with hand tools, such as machetes and t-post crimpers, but this is extremely labor-intensive and time-consuming. Powered options reduce physical strain and time commitment to termination. Some options that you may already have in the toolshed include weed eaters, rotary mowers, and rototillers. If you have a walk-behind tractor with a PTO, like a BCS or Grillo, the world of tool options opens up! At the Purdue Student Farm, the most commonly used cover crop termination tool is the flail mower, an attachment for their BCS tractor. These make quick work of cover crops big and small. A pass with the flail mower is followed by a power harrow to prepare the seedbed for the next crop.

## How do I know when to terminate?

Most cover crops should be terminated when they start to flower. There is some nuance to this – for example, hairy vetch, an excellent nitrogen-fixer, should be terminated only after it starts to set a little bit of seed, otherwise it will continue to grow and become a weed. For more information, see *Managing Cover Crops Profitably*, 3rd ed. (link to download at the end of this article).

## How long do I need to wait before planting the next crop?

There are a couple of ways to approach this. If you terminate a cover crop and apply compost on top of the residue, you can plant right away. If you terminate but don't plan to mulch, it's a good idea to wait 1-2 weeks after terminating so that soil microbes can process (cont. pg. 4)



*Cover crop management techniques.  
Far left: Standing cover crop of sudangrass and buckwheat.  
Center: Sudangrass and buckwheat flailed with a Berta flail mower moments before.  
Right: Fresh residue incorporated with a rototiller moments before.  
Photo by Ashley Adair.*

the residue a bit. While microbes are processing residue, they use nitrogen, which causes the “tie-up” you may have heard about before. Planting and transplanting into residue that’s too fresh will likely delay germination or stunt growth temporarily.

### ***How do I level up my cover crop management?***

Check out Crop Rotation on Organic Farms, linked at the end of this article. This resource can help you puzzle out which cover crops can help you figure out which cover crops fit best into your vegetable crop rotation. In organic management, the best way to keep your cash crop healthy is to practice prevention – prevention of soil-borne pests and disease. Cover crops are an important tool in this process, and this book points out some of the big ideas and the smaller nuances of choosing cover crops carefully to boost both plant and soil health on your farm.

### ***When’s the best time to buy seed?***

Most years, you should start thinking about purchasing cover crop seed by the end of July or early August. Have a plan in mind for both cool-season and warm-season cover crops, because some species tend to sell out quickly! For example, this year, sorghum sudangrass was on backorder as early as late May with some suppliers. The earlier you can get your seed, the better!

***Do you have more organic matter to discuss?  
Please reach out to me!***

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#### **Resources:**

Crop Rotation on Organic Farms: A Planning Manual, edited by Charles Mohler and Sue Ellen Johnson. Available through SARE at <https://www.sare.org/resources/crop-rotation-on-organic-farms/>

Managing Cover Crops Profitably, 3rd ed., edited by Andy Clark. Available through SARE at <https://www.sare.org/resources/managing-cover-crops-profitably-3rd-edition/>  
Midwest Cover Crops Field Guide, 3rd ed., edited by Eileen Kladviko. Available at the Purdue Ed Store at [https://mdc.itap.purdue.edu/item.asp?Item\\_Number=ID-433](https://mdc.itap.purdue.edu/item.asp?Item_Number=ID-433)



# “SELLING AT MARKET: TIPS TO RETURN HOME “SOLD OUT””

EXCERPT FROM “HOMEMADE FOR SALE: HOW TO SETUP AND MARKET A FOOD BUSINESS FROM YOUR HOME KITCHEN”

Below is an excerpt from the book, “Homemade for Sale, Second Edition: How to Set Up and Market a Food Business from your Home Kitchen” by Lisa Kivirist and John Ivanko. This book covers a wide range of topics in regard to “launching a successful food enterprise from your kitchen.” We often talk to farmers about diversifying farm operations. Another source of income for specialty growers can be value-added products, which led me to this book. The excerpt below caught my eye because it talks about returning home “sold out” from the farmers’ market. Whether you are selling just produce or have some value-added products these are good tips.

Excerpt from Pages 156-157 *“Homemade for Sale: How to Set Up and Market a Food Business from your Home Kitchen”*

## *Selling at Market: Tips to Return Home “Sold Out”*

Hard to believe, but in the early days of cottage food, some states limited you to only selling at farmers’ markets and some even limited CFOs to only farmers. Fortunately, those days are gone, and today markets serve as a great opportunity for product sales for everyone. Some ideas to boost your market or event bottom line include the following:

- *Cross-Promote*

What do you sell that pairs perfectly with something else at the market? Do you make relish and someone else sells sausages? Do you sell pound cake and another farmer sells fresh strawberries or blueberries that would make the perfect complement? Connect with these vendors and explore your cross-selling opportunities.

- *Cater to Kids*

You always see kids at markets. Often, they look a little bit bored while their parents or caregivers negotiate more time to linger and shop. Provide a solution: small treats for the kids, something to occupy them and satisfy their hunger. Selling something easy to hold and eat in a kid-appealing shape could score some points, like a cake pop or cakesicle.

- *Offer Multiples*

Everyone loves a special deal. Look at how some of the farmers promote their produce. Borrow a couple of tactics like “buy one, get one free” or volume discount pricing: “3 for \$10.”

- *Seek Shade*

If possible, visit the market beforehand and see how the sun hits it. Try to confirm a booth space in as much shade as possible to help preserve your products, especially if you have baked goods or candies.

- *“Gift exchange” (technically, avoid calling it “barter”)*

At the end of the market, especially if you have extra fresh fare like loaves of bread, gift exchange with other vendors for some take-home treats. Common after the market has closed these gift exchange scenes provide an extra bonus: building community and cultivating relationships. According to several tax accounts we’ve consulted, it’s best to call these “gift exchanges.” What you call it apparently matters to the IRS, since they want to try to collect tax on it. A gift if freely given.



About the authors: Lisa Kivirist and John Ivanko own and run “Inn Serendipity Bed & Breakfast” in Southwest, WI. They have authored books together and separately, such as “Soil Sisters A toolkit for Women Farmers” and “ECOpreneur: Putting Purpose and the Planet before Profits.”

If you are interested in learning more, the book is available on Amazon.

[https://www.amazon.com/Homemade-Sale-Second-Business-Kitchen/dp/0865719691/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?crid=2FYXJO3JXH7YJ&keywords=homemade+for+sale&qid=1689610507&prefix=homemade+for+sal%2Caps%2C131&sr=8-1](https://www.amazon.com/Homemade-Sale-Second-Business-Kitchen/dp/0865719691/ref=sr_1_1?crid=2FYXJO3JXH7YJ&keywords=homemade+for+sale&qid=1689610507&prefix=homemade+for+sal%2Caps%2C131&sr=8-1)



Once upon a time, long, long ago in the world I grew up in, a farm internship was generally referred to as “my childhood”, and came complete with a couple omnipresent “mentors”.

In today’s world growing up on any kind of farm certainly makes you part of “ the one percent” , but the highly specialized, industrial farms that dominate today’s rural landscapes may not offer the kind of educational experience that diverse, regenerative organic farming systems require.



Some educational experiences just ain't available in the classroom.

For those new to organic, or those new to organic production systems, getting a truly realistic understanding of what you’re getting into requires both a knowledge base and practical, hands-on experience(s). Enrolling in a course of study that offers both classes and an internship program may be ideal, but there are many pathways to practical experience.

Certainly, visiting organic farms - many offer field days or other “get acquainted” opportunities - is a good place to start. NGO’s like The Land Connection ([www.thelandconnection.org](http://www.thelandconnection.org)), The Illinois Stewardship Alliance ([www.ilstewards.org/](http://www.ilstewards.org/)), or Central Illinois Young Farmers Coalition on facebook can be places to start. It’s important to visit as many farms as you can and see examples of different ways to operate. Some will appeal to you, others may not.

As your farm starts to take shape, it’s important to find a mentor, someone you can get to know, call informally with a question, bounce ideas around with, and most importantly, trust to provide accurate and senseable advise. Maybe you’ll meet such a person as you integrate into the organic community. Attending events like the Marbleseed Organic Farming Conference, help each February in LaCrosse, WI, will give you access to formal mentorship programs - <https://marbleseed.org/programs/farmer-to-farmer-mentorship> - and a chance to interact with literally thousands of organic farmers, from brand new start-ups to those with decades of experience.

Events like farmer/author Gary Zimmer’s -“On-farm Intensive”, coming up in August, offer an opportunity engage with experts in organic, and with other farmers from around the country. This is especially useful for those in the final stages of developing their farm model.



<https://www.acresusa.com>

The Regenerative Ag Certificate Program offered at Heartland is designed to provide students with a very targeted, complete educational experience - including an internship - as quickly (2 semesters) and inexpensively as possible.

In my AGRI 180 class, each student develops their own unique “MyFarm” plan, a design for the farm you plan to own and operate. The semester is spent discussing the elements of design that make your farm regenerative - and ultimately certified organic.

An internship then completes the certificate, giving beginning farmers a well rounded experience.



[ssf.cropsciences.illinois.edu/small-farm-certificate](http://ssf.cropsciences.illinois.edu/small-farm-certificate)

Farmers.gov  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

### How to Start a Farm: Beginning Farmers and Ranchers

New to farming? Want to learn how to start a farm? USDA can help and offers additional assistance to beginning farmers and ranchers. USDA considers anyone who has operated a farm or ranch for less than ten years to be a beginning farmer or rancher. USDA can help you get started or grow your operation through a variety of programs and services, from farm loans to crop insurance, and conservation programs to disaster assistance.





# ROA: IT'S WHAT THE DOCTOR ORDERED

Most Americans don't think much about farming, except perhaps that it's fun to go to the farmers' market on Saturday morning. But while agriculture may seem to many like a distant issue best left to others, in reality it is the most important aspect of our world today. Not only because we all need to eat, but also because we need a planet to live on. And farmers are the key to both.

Today, a growing number of America's farmers are at the forefront of agriculture's next generation. Knowing we must feed people, restore the soil, conserve water, and combat climate change, these leaders are transforming how we farm, who is farming, and the role of farming in our health.

As a physician, I can personally attest to the power of farming. In ways we could have only dreamed of a few decades ago, healthy food and modern medicine are coming together. Put simply, the care many physicians are now ordering for their patients is being delivered by a fork rather than a pharmacy.

The reason is simple: medical professionals now see the American diet is responsible for a chronic disease crisis that's devastating the nation. Today, most Americans suffer at least one chronic disease, such as diabetes, heart disease, cancer, and obesity. Worse, fully 40 percent of all Americans are stricken by two or more. And food is often the cause.

This is more than just a health crisis. With so many of Americans struggling medically, our economy is weaker than it would otherwise be. Child development isn't as robust as it should be. And our national security isn't as strong as it must be.

Clearly, this is a critical problem. And the great news is American farmers are delivering the solution.

Today, a growing number of farms and ranches use Regenerative Organic Agriculture methods to produce the nutrient rich foods on which human health depends. Called ROA for short, these methods include composting, cover crops, rotational cropping and grazing, reduced tillage, and more. They are proven to be a sustainable, climate-smart approach to producing nutritious foods. They help restore farm and ranch lands, preserve scarce water, and generate a cleaner environment. Just as important, they improve producers' profitability by reducing input costs, enhancing output, and attracting higher prices.

I've had the opportunity to visit many farms and ranches, and I can never get over the difference ROA makes. Their topsoil is healthier, their produce and animal products are better, and the economic outlook for their operators is brighter.

I'm especially excited about what ROA means to my patients. I've long known about the power of healthy food and, in fact, had the privilege of writing several best-selling books about it. But when I see what nutrient-rich foods do for my patients, that's when the power of ROA to fix America's broken food system truly comes to life.

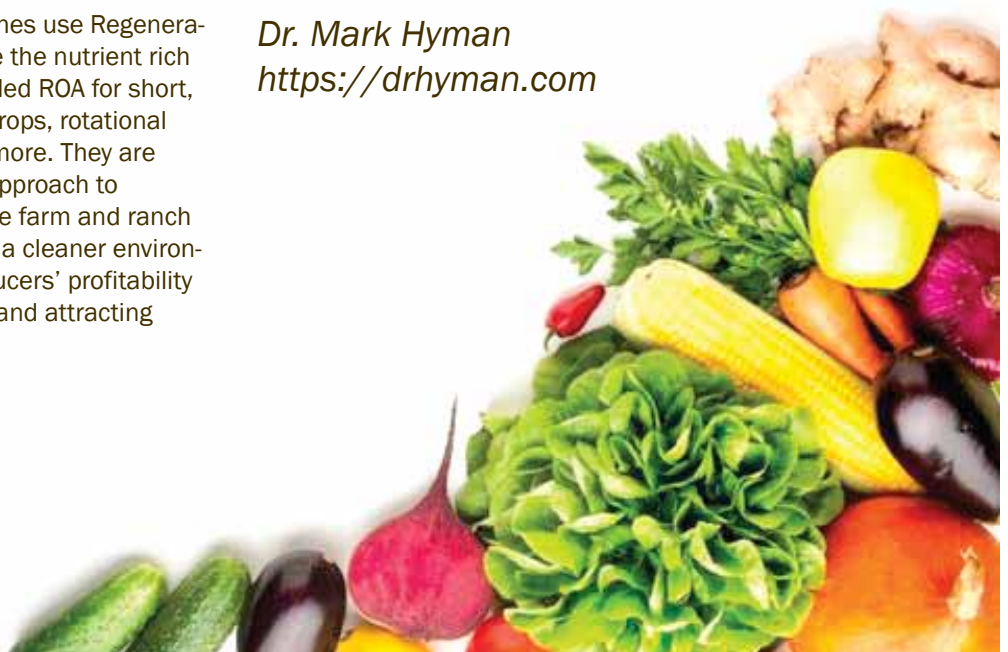
Nor am I the only one. In medical offices across America, nutritious food is being treated as what it truly is – medicine. And that means, a whole new market is being created for ROA farmers and ranchers. With more than 4-in-5 adults and 9-in-10 children receiving medical treatment every year, the opportunity to use food as medicine is almost limitless.

Federal and state lawmakers and officials get it, too, and are adopting Food Is Medicine policy in significant ways. A pilot program involving medically tailored meals is already underway, policy changes are being developed to train doctors and nurses about nutrition, and this year's Farm Bill promises to place even greater emphasis on ROA and nutritious food.

So, to all the ROA farmers and ranchers out there, I thank you. And to all the conventional producers who are giving ROA a look, I say this: As a farmer or rancher, you already have your country's deepest respect. And if you opt to use ROA to make your nation healthier, you will have the heartfelt gratitude of the medical profession, too.

Why? Well, it's simple. More and more every day, ROA is what the doctor orders!

*Dr. Mark Hyman*  
<https://drhyman.com>



# STRAWBERRY MARGARITA JAM RECIPE

This is one of Cathy Lafranz's (Miss Effie) favorite jam recipes. She originally got it from "Miss Diane" and can be found online at <https://www.allrecipes.com/recipe/274210/strawberry-margarita-jam>

## Ingredients

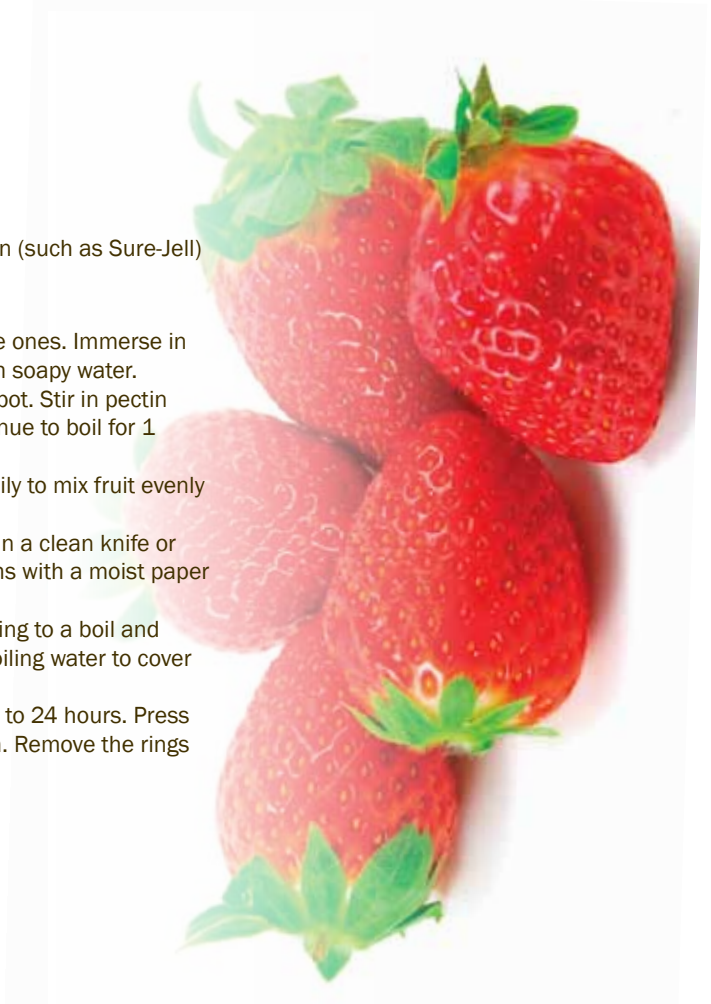
6 cups crushed strawberries	2/3 cup tequila
1/3 cup triple sec	1/3 cup lime juice
6 cups white sugar	1 (1.75 ounce) package low-sugar pectin (such as Sure-Jell)

## Directions

1. Inspect 9 half-pint jars for cracks and rings for rust, discarding any defective ones. Immerse in simmering water until filling is ready. Wash new, unused lids and rings in warm soapy water.
2. Mix strawberries, tequila, triple sec, and lime juice together in a large stockpot. Stir in pectin and mix well. Bring mixture to a boil over high heat, stirring occasionally; continue to boil for 1 minute. Remove from heat and immediately stir in sugar all at once.
3. Return mixture to a boil and boil for 1 minute. Remove from heat. Stir steadily to mix fruit evenly throughout jam and prevent floating fruit, about 5 minutes.
4. Ladle jam into the hot, sterilized jars, filling to within 1/4 inch of the top. Run a clean knife or thin spatula around the insides of the jars to remove any air bubbles. Wipe rims with a moist paper towel to remove any residue. Top with lids and screw rings on tightly.
5. Place a rack in the bottom of a large stockpot and fill halfway with water. Bring to a boil and lower jars 2 inches apart into the boiling water using a holder. Pour in more boiling water to cover jars by at least 1 inch. Bring to a rolling boil, cover, and process for 5 minutes.
6. Remove the jars from the stockpot and let rest, several inches apart, for 12 to 24 hours. Press the center of each lid with a finger to ensure the lid does not move up or down. Remove the rings for storage and store in a cool, dark area.

## Cook's Note:

*Do not use a food processor to crush the strawberries or you will get puree and the jam will not have a good texture. Use a potato masher.*



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