

Strawberries the fruit of success in Dengta



Fei Xueying shows off one of her succulent strawberries.

Yu Hong

Succulent strawberries are always the “queen” of winter fruit, luring residents to buy and taste the red, sweet and juicy fruit. Strawberry picking is also one of the fascinating leisure activities to enjoy on cold days, winning rave reviews among residents.

As winter comes, strawberry growers in Dengta Village in Jiading Industrial Zone are busy picking the fruit, including two new species — Shenyi and Shenxin at Nongdeng Strawberry Production Base. They are shooting up and ready to go to market.

Among the growers, although Fei Xueying looks the same as other local farmers, she is particularly renowned. She has won many awards for her exceptional growing skills, such as the national outstanding individual for women's post in urban and rural areas and Shanghai model worker. For the past 22 years, she has set a good example for villagers of becoming better off through diligence.

“My wish is that all of our villagers will become prosperous through planting strawberries,” said Fei with a big smile.

Dengta villagers have been growing strawberries since the 1990s, and every household grows on land in front of their houses. Born and raised in Taicang in neighboring Jiangsu Province, Fei moved to Jiading after getting married with her husband who is a Dengta local. From that moment, her life became inextricably connected to strawberries.

Fei has tried to grow many different varieties, including Fengxiang and Hongyan introduced from other places. However, Fengxiang tasted a little sour, while the seeds of Hongyan would be damaged during the long transit from Zhejiang. Considering the situation, she decided to change the rice fields in front of her house to grow strawberries.

To encourage farmers to achieve prosperity through growing strawberries, a 765-*mu* (50.9 hectare) Nongdeng Strawberry Production Base was built in Dengta Village in 2017. However, farmers weren't willing to rent a piece of land at the base to grow the fruit since it was more convenient to grow at or near their homes.

As such, Fei assumed the responsibility of being the first mover, contracting 18 greenhouses at the base. She owned



Visitors enjoy picking strawberries grown by Xue. — All photos by Zhu Yajun



Fei (second from left) gives agricultural technique training at the base.

the largest plots of land among female villagers, even though she had just undergone surgery and another 39-*mu* rice field needed to be grown at home.

“To be honest, I didn't think too much. I just wanted to take the lead so that villagers would know this is a good way to improve the living environment,” she said.

However, it was still not an easy thing to do. To eliminate villagers' concerns, Fei devoted herself to growing strawberries. She started working in the fields before dawn and didn't return home until dark, still with housework to do.

Fortunately, the spirit of diligence, bearing hardships and hard work contributed to her success.

Just when villagers looked forward to a bumper crop, however, a plague of an insect called thrip unexpectedly attacked all the ripening strawberries.

“Watching the helpless eyes of villagers, I told myself it was my responsibility to find a solution,” Fei said.

Since then, she launched agricultural technique training courses, learning scientific planting ways herself and taught to other growers, striving to

reduce plant diseases and insects.

Thanks to her efforts, the revenue of the greenhouses reached 200,000 yuan (US\$31,360) the first year, giving more hope to villagers.

Now, more than 300,000 high-quality seedlings can be cultivated annually and will provide to neighboring growers. Through the efforts of Fei, more than 100 households in the village rented greenhouses to grow strawberries, and the production base became more well known and talked about.

In 2010, inspired by visitors, Fei tried to grow strawberries in pots, combining nutrient soil and yogurt to spray the leaves. These potted strawberries became popular among buyers.

“One time, I saw the trickle irrigation facilities used for flowers and vegetables, which could evenly spray water fertilizer, so I thought, ‘Why not introduce the fertigation technology to strawberry fields?’” recalled Fei. “This method reduced the amount of labor required and enhanced the efficiency and quality of the fruit.”

Additionally, she studied a new technology — using solar power to control

the greenhouse temperature — and diversified the base with melons and corn to increase the land's productivity. This created more income, and the base became a second-to-none strawberry production base throughout Jiading.

Under Fei's guidance, villagers became more confident about making money through growing strawberries.

After seeing Fei's success, the Jiading Industrial Zone invested a million yuan as the agricultural developing fund to help build the strawberry brand “Nongdeng,” introducing professional teams, improving infrastructure facilities and creating an e-commerce platform.

Now, Nongdeng has become one of the most popular strawberry brands on the market, and the annual output value of the base has reached 2.5 million yuan.

The brand also helps drive the development of agricultural tourism. The Strawberry Culture Festival has been held for five consecutive years to expand the fruit's popularity, while picking strawberries in Dengta Village has become popular leisure and entertainment activities for people from not only Shanghai, but also neighboring provinces. The village economy has greatly improved based on the development of the strawberry industry.

Last year, picking activities were suspended due to COVID-19, and local strawberries became unsalable. Fei quickly changed the selling mode from face-to-face to online group purchases and offline unified distribution. She woke up at 6am to pick, package and transport strawberries to make sure customers get the freshest varieties. At last, demand actually exceeded supply.

After experiencing the ups and downs, Fei has yielded fruitful results, and she is dubbed the “Dengta woman” by villagers for leading them to common prosperity.

“I feel bashful that villagers call me the ‘woman’ of Dengta. I think ‘daughter’ of Dengta is more appropriate,” Fei said. “I hope our villagers continue to live a more prosperous life.”