

Strawberry expert at center of battle over fruit's future

By Larry Gordon, Los Angeles Times

On an ocean-facing hillside with stunning views of Monterey Bay, Douglas Shaw circulates among thousands of strawberry plants he has helped to breed and grow. But the man who is considered California's most esteemed strawberry expert declines to choose his all-time favorite.

The UC Davis plant sciences professor is a bit like a father unwilling to favor one child above his others – patented strawberry varieties with names such as Albion, Benicia, Portola, Monterey and San Andreas. He's also an unsentimental scientist with an eye toward hardier and tastier descendants.

"You can't get too attached to them, because the idea is that you are supposed to be replacing them with something better," he said.

He bites into one berry and reports that it tastes both sweet and acidic, a combination some people crave.

"It's not rocket science," he said of his evaluations. "It's objectivity."

Watsonville's fog, sandy soil and cool temperatures, often just in the 60s during summer days, make it ideal for growing the berries. Farmers here produce the most strawberries in the state, far surpassing growers in other productive areas in Santa Maria, Oxnard and Irvine.

Across town, the quasi-governmental California Strawberry Commission has its headquarters in an office suite decorated with photos of strawberry baskets and harvests and a floor rug in the shape of a berry. At the office entrance, as if

emphasizing the connection to the world of fields and supermarkets, a white board lists temperatures throughout the state, prices and production statistics.

Watsonville has long been ground zero for California's \$2.3-billion-a-year strawberry industry. Now it has taken center stage in a sour legal battle over the fruit's – and Shaw's – future.

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