

What does the Certification label on a box of strawberry plants really mean?

It is an important label that certifies the plants have been produced through an audited production system which aims to produce the healthiest bare-rooted runner and plug plants possible.

If plants are certified:

- ✓ The plant has been grown to the high standards outlined in the certification scheme (approved through an audit process)
- ✓ The plant is true to type (it is the variety originally bred)
- ✓ Plants should meet pre-defined standards with respect to agreed parameters like size or disease incidence, for example.

What if a plant is not certified?

- ✗ Plants may not have been grown to the standards outlined by the certification scheme. Please note that sometimes events totally out of the control of plant propagators may impact on their certification status. For example, certification may not be able to be given if the plants are potentially unable to perform to the expected standards, due to weather or other issues.

Note: A commercial fruit grower and plant propagator can still enter into an agreement to buy non-certified plants if the purchaser is firstly advised that the plants are not certified, and the quality of plants being purchased has been defined.

What is the purpose of the Strawberry Plant accreditation schemes in Australia?

The purpose of the Australian Strawberry Plant Accreditation Scheme is to facilitate the production of healthy true-to-type bare-rooted runners and plug plants.

Strawberry plant accreditation schemes are independent bodies who set standards and ensure propagators produce strawberry plants using the best protocol and practices available. There are two accreditation schemes in Australia for strawberry propagators

1. The Victorian Strawberry Industry Certification Authority Inc. (VSICA)
2. Australian Strawberry Plant Propagators Accreditation (ASPAA)

For more information about ASPAA, please refer to the SUMMER 2020 edition of this journal.

To propagate certified strawberry plants for commercial sale in Australia, each plant propagator must normally be accredited with a body such as ASPAA or VSICA. They must also have a signed non-exclusive or an exclusive sub-license from a licensor who owns the variety Intellectual Property (IP) which is known as the Plant Breeders Rights (PBR). It is very common for many of these sub-licences to have clauses that state that varieties must be produced under an accreditation scheme, and of course cannot be propagated any further. However, some IP owners may have their own rules and regulations for plant production and operate outside the major two schemes.

HOW STRAWBERRY PLANT CERTIFICATION WORKS



1 A new variety is bred & registered for Intellectual Property (IP) protection

The plant breeder may register the variety under Plant Breeders Rights (PBR) legislation, which prohibits unauthorised propagation of the new variety. The variety may have been bred in Australia, or overseas and subsequently imported into Australia through quarantine.

Sub-licence agreements are developed with plant propagators which allow them to grow and sell commercial quantities of a variety. It is usual for a royalty fee to be paid to the PBR owner, to cover all the long-term costs associated with breeding a new variety.



2 Propagator(s) are accredited and sign a sub-licence to grow the new variety

Before plants go into a high health facility for propagation and long-term maintenance they are screened for pests and diseases (especially viruses and similar organisms).

They are also subjected to further testing to ensure they have minimal disease and pests. After this process is completed, they are multiplied in small numbers to then be supplied to plant propagators who hold a sub-licence to grow the specific variety.

This process ensures plants are as healthy as possible & are usually described as high health plants.



3 Propagators grow plants following standards set by VSICA or ASPAA

Accredited plant propagators grow plants following strict rules to ensure the high health status of plants is maintained and the plants stay 'true to type' (like the original variety bred).

An independent audit process is undertaken to check that the growing practices and standards of the accreditation scheme have been followed. This include testing plants to ensure they are genetically like the original plant breed (true to type).



4 Plants are audited for quality: ONLY those plants which pass can be sold as 'Certified'

The independent auditor can recommend remedial actions to be taken.

After the audit process is completed, the accreditation scheme (ASPAA or VSICA) will make a decision whether to approve plants to be sold as 'Certified' plants.

If an audit fails for whatever reason, or the accreditation scheme is not satisfied that the quality of the plants will meet the required standards, they cannot be sold as 'Certified' plants.



5 Plants are sold to fruit growers

Plant propagators can only sell plants which have failed to meet the required standards as 'non-certified' and they must receive in writing an acknowledgment from the purchaser (fruit grower) buying the plants that the plants they are buying are not certified before plants can be sold.