

Garden Column
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Strawberries

God could have made a better berry, but he didn't. - Isaac Walton. Think about this. Strawberries and icecream. Strawberries and cake. Strawberries and champagne. Strawberries on cereal. And lastly, strawberries and chocolate, a fantastic assuage for anything negative. One bite and you forget all the bad things that happened (real or imagined) to you during the day.

Many people go to strawberry growers in this area and pick their own or buy already picked berries on site. These high quality berries are the result of professional growers who know what they're doing. However, there are those purists who want to step outside their door and feel the satisfaction of having grown and picked their own fruit, flaws and all.

Sweet, juicy strawberries are among the easiest and most productive fruits for home gardeners to grow. In most parts of the country, strawberries are planted in early spring; where winters are mild, you can also plant in the autumn. Obviously in this part of the world, strawberries should be planted in the spring.

There are basically three types of strawberries available to the home gardener. The June-bearing types bear one crop of berries each year in late spring or early summer (mid June to early July). Ever-bearing types, despite the name, generally produce only two crops, one in early summer and the second in early autumn. Day neutral types, the real ever-bearing type, produce flowers and thus fruit throughout most of the growing season. The ever-bearing and day neutral varieties bear for a longer period of time than June-bearing types but tend to be less vigorous. For June-bearing cultivars, the rule of thumb is about 4 weeks after flowering to picking fruit. Day neutral and ever-bearing types begin flowering around the same time in the season and take about the same time between flowering and harvest; the difference being they continue to flower throughout the summer months. Of the three types the June-bearing strawberries normally produce the largest yield per season but in a relatively short period of time. Within these types there are varieties adapted to almost every climate in the United States.

Plants are normally sold bare-root so make sure the roots don't dry out and the transplants are kept in a cool place before planting. Just before you set plants out, trim roots to 6 inches to make planting easier. Pick a sunny spot. Ten hours or more of sunlight per day is ideal. Plants that receive a minimum of 6 hours of direct sunlight each day should grow well and produce

a good crop, but berries will be fewer and fruit quality reduced compared to plants receiving more sun. A well decomposed manure worked into the soil before planting will aid soil water retention, provide nutrients and improve soil tilth.

Space plants approximately 12 to 18 inches apart in rows 2 to 2 1/2 feet apart. Plant strawberries so the crown is just above the soil level as a buried crown may rot and the top roots are at least 1/4 inch beneath the soil as exposed roots will dry out. After planting, firm the soil around the plant and water thoroughly. Strawberries do best when they are given the equivalent of 1 inch of rain per week. One good soaking each week should suffice in most soil types. Water early in the day so foliage has a chance to dry out before nightfall. New green growth should appear a week or so after planting.

Most strawberries spread by runners. To get large plants with smaller yields of big berries, pinch off all the runners. Conversely, for a heavier yield of smaller berries, allow some of the runners to grow and fruit, spacing them 7 to 10 inches apart in a circle around the mother plant. Cut off the extras so the bed doesn't become too crowded. If runners are left unchecked strawberry plants may take over a yard. Be careful about applying any insecticide. While strawberries are self fertile they require bees for pollination so.

Fertilize June bearers twice a year. Once, very lightly, when growth begins, then more heavily after fruiting. Everbearing types prefer consistent light fertilizing once every 2 weeks or so. Be careful that not too much fertilizer is applied as it will lead to excessive leafy growth, soft fruit, and fruit rot.

In our part of the world it's crucial to mulch strawberries to prevent winter damage. In late November or earlier if temperatures have dipped to freezing several times, lay straw loosely over the plants. Replace declining plants with new ones. This usually occurs every 3 years or so.

One of the most common strawberry diseases is Verticillium wilt that is caused by a soil-borne fungus. A wise precaution is to plant the disease-free plants that are found at Bloomers. Dispose of rotten fruit and foliage as this provides a substrate for pathogens, particularly fungi, to grow and spread to healthy plants.

Strawberry cultivars vary in winter hardiness. Check with the people at Bloomers to determine which are the best strawberry cultivars to grow in northern Minnesota. In the meantime happy eating.