

## GROWING STRAWBERRIES

Homegrown strawberries are a satisfying crop to include in your mini fruit garden. They can be grown in-ground, in containers, or in raised beds. They lend themselves to growing in vertical gardens as well, because the fruit drapes over the edges and stays clear of many pests that regularly hunt for berries laying directly on soil surfaces. Your strawberry patch will range in size, depending on the space available, but here are the guidelines for growing enough for your household.

**Plant spacing:** 1 foot (30 cm) apart

**Plants per person:** 6

**Sunlight:** full sun to partial shade—at least 6 hours of direct sunlight

**Ideal container specs:** at least 10 inches [25.5 cm] deep, diameter enough for at least 6 plants, good drainage

**Fruiting period:** Everbearing produce year-round in warm-winter climates; they produce in spring/summer/fall elsewhere. June-bearing produce in late-spring to early-summer



Strawberries grow well in raised beds and other containers.

### CHOOSING VARIETIES

Strawberries are sold as either bare-root crowns or potted seedlings. Bare-root options offer a wider selection of varieties. Gardeners can order bare-root crowns online or through seed catalogs in fall for delivery in winter or early spring. Crowns are shipped dormant and you plant them out upon receipt. Dormant crowns usually look sad and almost dead, but don't worry. When you plant them, they will leaf out within a few days to a week. Strawberry seedlings in 4-inch [10-cm] pots or six-packs are available at nurseries, and the selection is usually limited to popular varieties. But before we talk about cultivars, first let's look at the types available and determine which is best for you.

### JUNE-BEARING AND EVERBEARING

If you want to make jam or preserves, plant June-bearing strawberry varieties in your garden. They produce a larger crop within a limited time frame over the season (usually harvest lasts two to three weeks), which is perfect timing for preserving. You'll need a lot of strawberries all at once, so June-bearing is your best option.

Everbearing strawberries produce smaller crops several times per season. If you want strawberries for fresh eating over a longer period of time, opt either for everbearing or day neutral types (see the following paragraph). Fruiting times differ, depending on where you live. In warm-winter climates, you can expect a crop of everbearing strawberries as early as late winter, midseason as summer comes on, and again in fall. In cold-winter climates, everbearing strawberries produce a crop in spring, summer, and fall.

You may see sources that talk about day neutral varieties. The term "day neutral" means these varieties don't require a specific day-length in order to fruit

so they will produce continuously in most climates. The thing is, most nurseries don't label strawberries as day neutral. You'll see either June-bearing or everbearing. It's confusing, but just know that there are day neutral varieties that are labeled as everbearing, such as 'Seascape', and they will produce during the entire season. There are some hybrids, such as 'Sequoia', that are conflictingly labeled as everbearing in one catalog and June-bearing in another. So let's not get hung up on these details. Do your research and select the variety that best suits your climate, day length, and needs.

## PLANTING STRAWBERRIES

Strawberry plant anatomy consists of the roots, the crown, leaves, fruit, and runners (also called daughters). When planting strawberries, either bare-root or nursery seedlings, the crown is the most important part. The crown is the part of the plant where the roots join the stems and leaves. The crown is usually a darker color than the roots, with no trace of green like the stems. Why is it so important to identify this segment of the plant? If you bury the crown too deeply, then your plant will rot and die. If you leave the crown too exposed above the soil level, it will dry out and wither into oblivion. Channel your inner Goldilocks and plant the crown "just right." Just right is this: bury the roots but leave the crown sitting above soil level.

Strawberries need well-amended soil so add plenty of compost and worm castings before planting. Mix in organic berry fertilizer in the planting hole, and water with kelp emulsion to settle the soil and help reduce transplant shock.

### ALPINE STRAWBERRIES

There is a third classification of strawberry to consider for your mini fruit garden. Alpine or wild strawberries produce smaller fruits than typical varieties, but their sugars are concentrated for a burst of sweetness in every bite. Often referred to by their French name of *fraise des bois*, they are a woodland strawberry that grows well in landscapes as a ground-cover and in raised beds. They do not have a running behavior, so they will stay within bounds in tiny gardens. If you want to plant something completely different, choose a white variety. Its white flesh has red seeds when the berries are ripe.



Make sure the crown is above soil level, but not too high, so it's just right!

### TO MULCH OR NOT TO MULCH

Mulch is essential for a healthy garden. Chip bark helps keep roots cool, feeds soil microbes, and helps soil retain moisture. But is it always a good idea? When it comes to strawberries, perhaps not. Two of strawberry's main pests are the sow bug (*Oniscidea*) and pill bug (*Armadillidiidae*). These critters love to feed on decaying matter, and while they are there, they nibble on your sweet, hard-earned strawberries too. For this reason, it is important to remove spent foliage around strawberry plants throughout the season. Because mulch is also decaying matter, it can

create the perfect environment for sow/pill bugs to populate. You can decide for yourself whether chip bark works in your strawberry patch or not. There are alternatives, such as plastic sheeting or weed barriers. But some consider those unsightly or don't want plastic in their garden. The good news is, when planting bio-intensively, strawberries and other crops will form their own living mulch when they are planted closer together. Eventually the plants and daughters (if they're allowed to root) fill in the space and mulch isn't needed.

### FEEDING AND HARVESTING STRAWBERRIES

Strawberries are considered heavy feeders. As with other fruit-producing crops, remove the first set of flowers after planting to focus the plants' energy on root development. After that, feed your strawberry plants as they begin to flower and set fruit. Apply an organic berry fertilizer once per month after testing for nutrient levels in your soil. Remember: Sandy soils will require more frequent addition of nutrients than clay soils. Adjust the feeding schedule based on test results.

Strawberries can develop problems or deformities if certain nutrients or micronutrients are lacking. Cat-facing, for example, is a result of poor pollination or a boron deficiency. Leaves will often turn brown along the edges if the soil is lacking either nitrogen or magnesium. If you are regularly feeding your strawberries and they still show signs of leaf deterioration or deficiency, consider reducing the number of plants in the container or remove all daughter plants.



Cat-facing deforms strawberries, but they are still edible.

Opposite Top: Elevated planters can keep strawberries out of harm's way.

Opposite Bottom: Use your harvest in breakfast each morning or as a midday snack.



To harvest strawberries, look for an even coverage of deep red color. Strawberries are not ripe if there is still a white ring around the stem end of the berry. Look under the calyx, the pointy foliage that tops each berry, to check for ripeness. Wait for the color to change completely before harvesting for the sweetest results. Pinch the stems or snip berries off with shears, keeping some of the stem intact. Store unwashed berries in a glass container with a dry paper towel on the bottom and wash before eating. You can process strawberries into jam, chop and freeze them for smoothies, and bake them into pies.

Read up on strawberry pest and disease issues in chapter 9.



Turn garden harvests into jams and jellies for use later in the year.

## PRUNING STRAWBERRIES

Strawberry plants require minimal but important upkeep during and after their season. As mentioned, the most common critters that attack strawberries love decaying matter. Sow bugs and pill bugs make a home under the thick debris of old strawberry leaves so it's critical to remove spent leaves regularly. As leaves yellow, snip stems off at the base of the plant and toss them in your compost bin. Cut off any brown leaves at the base of the plant too. Cut rather than pull, as sometimes pulling will unearth an entire plant.

Inspect the plants for daughters every few weeks and decide whether you want to keep or remove them. There are two schools of thought around daughters. Some gardeners prefer not to keep them because they siphon energy and nutrients away from the mother plant. Other gardeners encourage daughters in order to increase the size of their berry patch by propagating new plants for free. It's up to you. If you plan to keep them, find an open space and pin the daughter vine to the soil to help it develop roots. Once the roots have developed (there should be slight resistance when you gently tug on the plant), "cut the cord" from the mother plant and

### Revitalizing Strawberry Plants

Rather than throw away your strawberry plants after a couple of years, you can rejuvenate both plants and soil with this trick: in early spring, before the plants begin flowering, dig up each strawberry plant, including the entire rootball and some soil around it, and set it aside on a tarp or in a box. Next, add a 1- to 2-inch [2.5- to 5-cm] layer of compost to the existing soil and scratch it in with your fingers. Apply organic fruit and berry fertilizer and work it in to the soil. Then replant your strawberry plants 1 foot [30 cm] apart. If you have extras, give them away to fellow gardeners. Water your transplanted strawberry plants with diluted kelp emulsion to ease transplant shock and encourage root development. The strawberries will take root quickly in the richly amended soil and will start producing new leaves and fruit in no time.

trim away the extra length. If you don't want to allow daughters to grow, be diligent about cutting them off at the base of the mother plant.

Even though they are perennial, as strawberry plants age they become less productive. Some gar-

deners tear out their strawberry patch every two to three years to replace them with fresh plants. See the "Revitalizing Strawberry Plants" sidebar for a trick to save some money and still have high-yielding plants.

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