



Strawberries

Fresh strawberries you have grown with your own hands are one of the most delightful tastes of summer. Supermarket strawberries bred for their ability to travel simply cannot hold a candle to the luscious flavor of homegrown ones. Easy to grow and quick to produce, strawberries are an excellent introduction to fruit growing.

Select a site for your strawberry patch that gets good, full sun for at least 6 hours every day. Your site should also be where you can get water to it and it needs to have good drainage. Stay away from low spots in the garden where water collects in spring.

As few as 2 dozen plants can supply enough fruit for a family of four. Each plant needs about 1 square foot of space so compute your bed size based on this measurement. Twenty-four plants need 24 square feet so a 6x6 foot bed or 2x12 foot row is plenty.

Weed control is very important for growing good fruit. Start by getting rid of all weeds before you start tilling or amending the soil. You can make pulling weeds easier if you make sure the ground is well soaked. Chemical weed killer can also be used but wait two weeks before planting the strawberries. Raised beds are an excellent choice for strawberries and are a good way to insure good, weed free soil. A raised bed of one foot is deep enough for strawberries. Their root system is shallow and extensive.

Like all fruiting plants, strawberries are heavy feeders and need to be started in very good soil. Whether you are using native soil or bringing in soil to fill a raised bed, amend it generously with compost or well rotted manure. This is your once chance to make sure your plants have good soil to spread their roots out in and become well established. You will top dress your bed yearly but this initial planting sets the stage for your success to come.

Strawberries are purchased as bare root plants. Typically they do not have any top growth and are dormant when they are sold. As the season progresses, they may have leaves and that is fine. Plan to plant the strawberries within 24 hours of buying them and make sure you keep them from drying out before they are planted. Plant the strawberries so that the crown, the part where the roots join the leaves, is just at soil level. See the illustration below.



If you go too deep the plant is apt to rot, too shallow and the roots will be exposed to drying out. You can plant strawberries anytime after the soil has dried up enough to work and should get them in the ground before June 30th.

Give each plant about one square foot of space. In a row, space plants one foot apart. In a grid planting, space plants on one foot centers. As your patch matures, you will allow runners to take root and replace mother plants so spend some time during the growing season cutting off weak runners and placing strong ones where you want them to root. Do not allow runners to go rampant in your strawberry patch; too many runners will weaken mother plants and cause an overall decline in fruit production.

Using mulch in your strawberry patch solves several growing problems and is highly recommended. Mulch helps keep the roots cool which makes for happy productive plants. It also holds your fruit above the soil and keeps it clean. Fruit lying on damp soil is more prone to rot. Clean straw is the best mulch but you can use grass clippings that are free of weeds or chemicals. Wood chips on paths in your strawberry bed make moving along the plants and picking easier but don't use them to directly mulch the plants, choose straw or grass instead. In fall, remove about half the mulch and top dress over it with compost to refresh your soil. Re-mulch your bed every spring with new material.

Like most fruits, strawberries are mostly water. Good supplemental watering helps develop the sugars that give strawberries their most delicious taste. Overhead watering can cause some leaf diseases in strawberries so we recommend soaker hoses or a drip system. Keep your strawberry patch evenly moist but not soaked and do not let it dry out between watering. Be sure to keep watering your patch even when fruiting is over to maintain good plant health.

In fall you should cut the plants back and mulch them with evergreen boughs for protection. Be careful you do not cut into the crowns when you are cutting them back. You can cut off runners as they appear or do it with your fall cleanup, choosing strong ones to remain and rejuvenate the patch. Uncover your patch as soon as possible in spring and get fresh mulch down. Apply a fresh top dressing of compost each year either in fall or spring. You must feed your strawberries every season as the fruit production typically uses up nutrients in the soil very quickly.

Strawberries are classified under three basic types, June bearers, ever bearers and day neutrals. The differences relate to how the plants produce fruit. June bearers are not good choices for our Montana growing season so Plant Land offers only everbearer and day neutral varieties. Everbearers have a very misleading name. Developed to produce fruit over a longer period, they actually produce a significant early crop and then a smaller late crop. The berries tend to be medium size and are very good for freezing. Everbearers produce their fruiting buds during the longer days of summer and thus need a site with strong sun for at least 6 hours a day. Day neutral strawberries were developed to produce fruit buds regardless of day length thus stretching the season for fresh berries. Home gardeners not interested in processing one large harvest prefer these for fresh eating. The quality of the fruit is very good.

Plant Land's Strawberry Selections

Everbearing Varieties

Fort Laramie: This USDA release is extremely winter hardy. The large, bright scarlet fruit has a dark pink to scarlet interior. The firm, sweet flesh is very aromatic. This is a good choice for eating, freezing and preserves.

Quinault: A Washington State release that is also very hardy. It is a large berry, firm and deep red with good flavor. While it is good for fresh eating and preserves, it is not recommended for freezing. The yield is high on vigorous plants.

Day Neutral Varieties

Seascape: Large, delicious bright red strawberries in spring, summer, and fall--three seasons of sweetness. Seascape is a very productive and disease-resistant variety ideal for gardens or containers.

June Bearing Varieties

Honeoye: Plants are vigorous and very productive, bearing over a longer period than most varieties. Large, conic shaped, bright red fruit. Firm flesh with above average quality. Very winter hardy.