



Growing Strawberries



If you've ever picked a sweet red strawberry right off the plant and popped it into your mouth, then you already know how much better they taste when freshly picked. Strawberries are loaded with natural sugars that quickly convert to starch once they're picked. So, the fresher the berry, the sweeter the taste. That means you have to grow your own to get the best tasting berries possible.

Planning

It'll take a full season before your strawberry patch is in full production. You should begin by doing a little research on selecting the right strawberry for your area and your needs. Be sure to check out the garden catalogs for information on disease resistance and hardiness of specific varieties.

Everbearing varieties produce lightly in early summer, a few berries throughout the summer, and a heavier crop in late summer/early fall. Everbearers are good for home gardeners who don't do much preserving but like having fresh berries over the whole season. Best suited to hardiness zones 5-8, everbearers often perform poorly in the northern and southern extremes of the USA. The regular spring or June bearing varieties provide a heavier crop of berries, but over a shorter season.

"Mother" plants are usually purchased in bunches of 25 or more. Generally, one plant will produce 1-2 quarts of berries, so plan accordingly. About 6 weeks after planting, the mother plants will begin to send out runners. The number of runners produced by each plant depends upon the variety. When a runner reaches 8-10 inches in length, it shoots upward and forms a "daughter" plant. That same runner will then continue to grow outward and set several more daughter plants if allowed to. The daughter plants will provide most of next season's strawberry crop.

For best yields, start a new batch of plants each year and remove plants that have already fruited. Be sure to purchase certified disease-free strawberry plants. The money saved by digging daughter plants from someone else's bed is not worth the risk of planting diseased, weak or unproductive plants.

Preparation

Strawberries perform best in a well prepared bed with light, rich, slightly acid (pH of 5-6) soil with lots of moisture-holding organic matter worked in. Strawberries have very shallow root systems and get much of their moisture and food from the top few inches of soil. The addition of peat moss, compost or manure will greatly benefit your strawberry crop. If you have very heavy soil, planting in raised beds will provide much better drainage which in turn encourages healthy roots.

If you are planting in an area that has not previously been cultivated, you would be wise to remove sod and plant a cover crop for a season before planting strawberries. This will help to eliminate the three worst enemies of strawberries - grass, weeds and white grubs. Strawberry roots are among the favorite food of white grubs, who live in sod-covered soils. Additionally, grass and weeds compete with the shallow-rooted strawberries for moisture and nutrients.

Planting

The time to plant strawberries is when the trees in your area begin to leaf out. If you mail-ordered plants and they arrive too early, just store them in your refrigerator until it's time to plant. Just be sure that the roots do not dry out.

Space your rows 3 to 4 feet apart and leave 18 inches between plants. Trim the roots of new plants to no more than 6 inches, and soak plant roots in water for an hour or so before planting. Be careful to set the plants in the soil at the proper depth. Do not bury the crown of the plant or it will smother and die. Also be sure that the plant is not set too high or the roots will dry out. Pack soil around the roots and water well. A light dose of fertilizer at planting time can be applied.

Care

You should not let your strawberry plants set fruit their first year because this will greatly weaken the plant even if it only produces a berry or two. Pick off all the blooms as soon as they form. This will force all of the mother plant's energy into producing vigorous daughter plants that will give you great yields the following season.

Keep only the first daughter plant of each runner as it will produce much better than a second or third daughter of the same runner. Also, only keep a maximum of 5 daughter plants to each mother, and clip off all the others. With everbearing varieties, you can stop picking off blossoms around midsummer of the first year and allow the plants to produce a fall crop.

When your first fruit-bearing season is over, you'll do best to till in the plants and begin again. The longer you keep the plants going, the smaller your yields will be and the more vulnerable they'll be to disease and weeds. Rotating your strawberry crop is also highly recommended. If you want strawberries every year, you need to maintain two beds - one to bear fruit and one to produce next season's fruit-bearers. If you've enjoyed a productive and healthy strawberry season, you may decide to renovate your berry bed by thinning out most plants and leaving the strongest to produce runners and daughters for the third year. You should, however, expect a smaller harvest.

Harvest

In your second season, your berries will ripen about a month after the plants bloom. Be sure to pinch off berries at the stem with your thumbnail. Pick all ripe berries every few days. Expect a 2 - 3 week harvest. Avoid picking green tipped berries that are not fully ripened. Also, do not leave remnants of the berries on the plant as it can cause plant rot.

Winter Protection

Strawberries need winter protection in the northeast in order to provide peak production. Straw is an excellent winter cover because it doesn't form a hard mat or throw around lots of weed seeds. Plus, you can pull it off the plants once spring arrives and use it around the plants to retain soil moisture and protect ripening fruit.

Cover your strawberry plants with 5 - 6" of straw just when the ground begins to freeze and temperatures dip down into the low 20's to high teens. Be sure to leave the mulch on all winter and don't be tempted to pull it off on the first warm day in March or April. The tender flower buds are very susceptible to late spring frosts.

For More Information on Capital District Community Gardens' programs or to make a tax-deductible donation contact:



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