

SWEET STRAWBERRIES FROM YOUR GARDEN

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Most people love sweet, juicy, fresh strawberries. Luckily, strawberries are one of the easiest fruits to grow in your home garden. They don't take much room, and they have attractive foliage that can double as a groundcover in your landscape. Follow some basic instructions, and you can be eating the best strawberry shortcake, made with freshly-picked, home-grown strawberries!

There are three types of strawberries: June-bearing, which form flower buds for the next year in response to the shortening days of late summer, Everbearing, which form flower buds in response to long days in mid-summer, or Day Neutral, which do not respond to day length.

The most important step in having a successful strawberry crop is to choose a good site and prepare it well. Your site should get a minimum of a half day of full sunlight, and should have well-drained, fertile soil. Start with a soil test, and add recommended amounts of fertilizer and organic matter. Be sure to get all existing perennial weeds, especially quackgrass, under control before planting strawberries. Purchase your strawberry plants from a reputable nursery. Getting plants from friends or neighbors invites diseases and other pest problems.

Wait to plant your strawberry plants until the soil is warm and workable, usually around mid- to late May in our area. It is imperative that the crowns of the plant are planted at the right depth. If planted too deep, the plant may suffocate and not grow. If not planted deep enough, the crown will grow above the soil surface and the root system will be compromised. Plants should be planted so the bottom of the crown is in the soil and the top is just exposed.

Although it's painful to do, the flowers should be removed during the first summer after the strawberries are planted. This encourages plants to send out runners and roots rather than spend their energy on fruit production. Unfortunately, this means you won't be eating that strawberry shortcake the first year. But, it also means you will have bigger and better strawberry shortcake in following years!

Because strawberries have a shallow root system, it is important to keep them consistently watered throughout the growing season. An inch of water each week, either from rainfall or your sprinkler, is best.

If you're growing June bearing strawberries, don't add any nitrogen fertilizer until after you have harvested your crop. Too much nitrogen will cause plants to produce leaves rather than fruit. Otherwise, feed your strawberries a nitrogen fertilizer every 3-4 weeks during the growing season until early August, after which fertilizer should not be applied to allow plants to harden off for the winter.

Once the ground has started to freeze in November, cover your strawberry plants with 4-6 inches of mulch, such as straw. This will protect the plants from the early spring freezing and thawing, which can damage the plants. Remove the mulch in early April, but be ready to cover plants to protect from frost after they begin to flower in May.

Each year after your harvest is complete, renovate the patch by tilling between rows and removing many of the runners and young plants, thereby keeping your rows narrow. If possible, you can add a bit of soil around the crowns of the plants, which will probably have gotten higher than the soil level. Keep the patch fertilized and well watered after harvest.

If your patch is given this care, you can get great crops for 4-5 years. At that point, the plants are getting old and will be less productive. Start over with newly purchased plants in a new location.

For information on which varieties of strawberries are best for our area, call your UW-Extension office, and have a “berry nice” gardening season!

SEEDS FOR THOUGHT:

Don't rush planting warm-season crops, such as tomatoes and green peppers. Wait until the end of May when soil and night temperatures are warmer. Putting them in cool soil will slow their growth and they will probably produce fruit later than those planted a few weeks later in warmer soil.

It's not too early to plant out pansies, Johnny jump-ups and other violas. They do well in cool weather, and can tolerate spring frosts. It's also not too early to direct seed onions, peas, radish, spinach, and lettuce.

Our mild winter might mean more of some kinds of insects, but it's too early to tell which ones. Spring weather has a greater impact on insect populations than winter temperatures. The timing of spring temperatures and moisture will determine how many mosquitoes and other insects we have to deal with this summer.