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# All About Strawberries

## Planting

In the home garden, strawberries make an excellent groundcover for either their ornamental or fruiting properties. Other planting possibilities for strawberry plants include whiskey or wine barrels or specially designed terra cotta or concrete strawberry planters. Strawberries planted in the ground will have a longer life than those in pots, but because strawberry plants are so easily obtained, container growing is not too restrictive.

Strawberry plants thrive in an area rich in organic matter; therefore, use plenty of **Bumper Crop Black Soil Conditioner** when preparing your planting area. Moderate amounts of manures may also be used but beware of uncomposted steer and horse manures which contain weed seeds and significant levels of salts. Chicken manure or **Master Nursery Paydirt** (45% chicken manure) are also good choices for soil amendment. Good drainage is essential because strawberries can be susceptible to root rot.

Water deeply using drip irrigation or soaker hose for best results. Strawberries like to be moist, not wet for best fruit production. If allowed to become too dry between waterings, the fruit suffers—thick skinned, poor tasting, small or shriveled berries will result. Try watering in the morning so that the plant has plenty of moisture to withstand hot summer afternoons.

## Fertilization

The same fertilizer that works in your vegetable garden will give excellent results on strawberries. Look for a good balanced blend of nitrogen, phosphorous, and potash. Products such as **Master Nursery Fruit Tree & Vine Food**, **Master Nursery Master Start** or **Best All Purpose 16-16-16** all work well. These are time-release granular products easily broadcast by hand or through a whirlybird. Specific instructions for repeat fertilization are given on each product; however, one can fertilize on the average of 3-4 times per year.

**Water soluble fertilizers** like *Master Nursery Bud & Bloom* can also be used. These products must be applied more often because the plant utilizes all of the fertilizer in a short amount of time. Using a water-soluble fertilizer, you could easily fertilize every two weeks from April 15 through August 15.

Strawberries will grow happily in full sun, however, for best fruit production, give your plants some afternoon shade. Larger, juicier, thinner skinned fruit will occur because moisture is not lost through the skin in the hottest part of the day.

Strawberries are also a favorite of birds. In fact, stiff competition for ripe berries will occur! Consider bird netting to protect your precious fruits. You may even consider planting varieties that produce smaller fruit—the ripening time is shorter. Wily birds will have less time to find your strawberry patch.

At maturity, each strawberry plant may produce up to one pound of berries per year. Spacing your plants is important for their overall health. For high density production, consider planting one strawberry in an 18" by 4' area. For normal density, a more conservative planting of one plant in a 2' by 4' area is sufficient.

**In the fall**, thin runners so that they are 3" to 5" apart. If possible, trim the tops off the plants in January or February prior to the spring flush of growth. This helps prevent fruit rot. You may winter mulch if desired using compost or shredded bark. The compost, if applied in a fairly thin layer in the fall, need not be removed, as it will work its way into the soil. Bark products, however, do not readily decompose because of our low relative humidity, and should be removed.

Mulching with straw or hay is not recommended for two reasons: rodents find hay and straw a perfect nesting area and seed from the hay or straw may germinate in your strawberry patch!

### **Everbearing Varieties**

As the name implies, these varieties will produce fruit all through the growing season. After planting, keep all flowers picked off until mid-June, this establishes a strong plant. Plants will flower and fruit the best the rest of the summer and fall until a frost occurs. The original mother plant should be rogued out after the second year. Lots of runners will be produced, so don't be shy about periodic thinning.

- Quinalt:** Medium berry, firm and red with excellent flavor
- Fort Laramie:** Adapted to drier colder climates
- Fern:** Always has fruit in different stages of development. Large, very firm, sweet berries.
- Hecker:** Extra hardy, fruit medium size with excellent flavor
- Tri Star:** Adapted to a variety of climates
- Eversweet:** Long, conical fruit, with excellent flavor. Heat tolerant
- Seascape:** Fruit is symmetrically medium to long conic, firm. Outstanding flavor.

### **Spring Crop Varieties**

When planting spring crop varieties, the greatest fruit production will not occur until the second season. These varieties will yield one significantly large crop per growing season which is perfect for the home canner or preserver. Sporadic fruit production may occur over the rest of the growing season—perfect for garnish or a once-in-a-while treat.

After spring crop varieties are harvested, the plants go dormant prior to summer and fall growth and fruit set, so don't expect a lot of growth immediately.

- Benton:** Late, extra hardy, fruit is very bright, excellent keeping quality, drought and disease resistant.
- Earliglow:** High yields of uniform deep red fruit with outstanding flavor, premium sweetness.
- Sequoia:** Earliest, very large, dark red berries with real good flavor. Good quality for dessert and freezing.
- Hood:** Best flavor, known best as a fine preserve and jam berry.
- Rainier:** Extra hardy, best home garden variety from standpoint of fruit quality and disease resistance.

### **Strawberries in Containers**

Strawberry plants will do well in containers; however, they may fruit less than in the ground because container growth causes more constricted root development. By providing optimum growing conditions, good crops will result.

Start with the largest size container which your space will allow. Whiskey or wine barrels work well, as do large plastic or terra-cotta pots. Use a high-quality potting soil. **Unigro Potting Soil** (a sterilized potting medium) or **Gardner & Bloome** (an organic potting medium) are good choices. Ensure that your container has good drainage. Plant strawberries at a rate of slightly greater density than recommended for garden planting—don't stuff the container full, as each plant will not have room to grow. You'll have to experiment. If you see the plants are competing too heavily for growing space, thin them out. If you see that the plants are not covering as quickly as you had anticipated, consider adding a few as the season progresses.

Water and fertilize well. The fertilizers recommended for garden use will work for container plantings. Containers often dry out quicker than garden situations, so more frequent watering may be necessary. You might even consider adding a polymer product (a water retention additive) to your potting soil. Be sure to water your container through the fall and winter. Mulch for winter protection if your container will allow. Provide afternoon shade for containers as recommended for garden planting.