



# The Strawberry

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## A Perennial Fruit – A Perpetual Favorite

A member of the rose family, the strawberry plant's attractive foliage, petite white blossoms and tasty fruit make it one of the most popular garden plants in the world. Planting strawberries brings the modern gardener back to the roots of civilization.



In fact, I often wonder if it wasn't the sweet, tempting strawberry plant, rather than the apple tree, that caused Adam and Eve's fall from grace and subsequent expulsion from the Garden of Eden. According to one legend, if you break the heart-shaped strawberry in half and share it with the one you love, he or she will fall in love with you.

Although strawberry picking and eating has been a favorite pastime through the centuries, our ancestors had no reason to plant strawberries since in ancient times the wild strawberry plant grew profusely in wooded areas. During the 16th Century, explorers brought a larger, sweeter, strawberry plant back from their travels in the Western Hemisphere and planting strawberries began in earnest.

### *Choosing Your Favorite Strawberry*

Choosing the right strawberry cultivars can be a tough decision since there are hundreds that differ in flavor, size, texture and even color. When choosing strawberry varieties, even your local nursery may have several types that differ in terms of hardiness, yield, disease resistance, size, flavor, and color.

Fortunately, for the strawberry gardener, most strawberry varieties have several characteristics that make it easy to choose which cultivars to grow. Simplify your choice and find the perfect cultivar for your needs by finding information from your area Home Extension Service. Many Home Extensions have detailed web sites that contain descriptions of the strawberry varieties that thrive in their areas.

The USDA (United States Department of Agriculture) also maintains an extensive Internet database on strawberry varieties. So, even if you live in an area that doesn't have a Home Extension Service, you can probably still find strawberry varieties for your location by referencing an area that is environmentally similar to yours.

In fact, several strawberry varieties produce equally as well in both hemisphere's of the globe. For instance, the *Alpine Strawberry* is an American day-neutral favorite and is a versatile strawberry that is not only grown in beds, but is also used as a ground cover and grown as an ornamental in hanging containers and strawberry pots. Italy, which is a major exporter of strawberries, has imported the *Pocahontas strawberry* from the United States and this strawberry variety is now one of the favorite Italian strawberries.

If you live in a northern climate, hardiness may be a major priority in the strawberry varieties you choose. Disease resistance is also a big concern, especially if your garden is limited in size and you need to establish a berry patch in a permanent location. Another concern is how much your strawberry plants will produce and of course, the #1 concern is flavor!

## Planning Your Strawberry Patch

One of the most important aspects of a healthy strawberry patch is where it's at. Plant strawberries in the sunniest spot you can find. Strawberries need a location that has a *minimum* of six hours of sunlight a day. Although you can get a harvestable crop with as little as six hours of direct sunlight per day, the largest harvests and best quality berries come from those plants that get the advantage of full sun.

Choose a spot away from large trees, which may send roots into your strawberry bed.

When making a strawberry bed in an established garden, be sure to locate it away from any spot where you have grown peppers, tomatoes, eggplant or potatoes. These plants can harbor verticillium wilt, which is devastating to strawberries.



Your strawberry bed will do best if you begin giving it the care it needs in the fall. The shallow rooted strawberry plant is poor competition for weeds, shrubs, trees, or other plants.. Tilling a spot for strawberries in the fall eliminates a lot of the invasive flora that causes problems for strawberry gardeners during the growing season.

In the spring, after the frost is out of the ground and the soil is dry, till the soil again. The fall is also the right time to add rich organic matter, such as manure or compost, to your soil to "set" your strawberry plants.

Although strawberries won't thrive in saturated ground, they do need a moist environment. Amend the soil with a good supply of nutrient rich organic matter to improve aeration, drainage, and increase moisture-holding capacity.

## Purchasing Strawberry Plants

The best time to purchase strawberry plants is autumn. Find end of season plants at dirt-cheap prices or order new plants for spring delivery. Nurseries have limited space and often take orders for wholesale plants on a first-come, first-served basis. Frequently, their stock is depleted long before spring.

Even the home gardener can benefit from purchasing wholesale strawberry plants. Your strawberry plant nursery may offer wholesale strawberry plants packed in bundles

containing as few as 25 plants per bundle or in boxes containing as many as 1500 strawberry plants per box. Usually you'll find that the more plants you buy, the less expensive they become.

However, thirty plants usually provide enough strawberries for a family of four. Even so, purchasing wholesale strawberry plants also broadens your options. If you are uncertain about where to plant strawberries, consider starting strawberry beds in several garden locations or keep part of your order aside to brighten up your outdoors with a strawberry pot or hanging strawberry plant. Select your plants carefully and purchase only virus-tested transplants.

If your strawberry nursery doesn't offer delayed shipping, there is still no need for worry. Strawberries are a cool weather crop and store easily in a cool, moist place over winter. Depending on where you live, unheated garages, root cellars, and basements are all acceptable for storing bare-root strawberry plants as long as they are safe from freezing. Cover roots with sand, wood shavings or soil.

Ordering or purchasing strawberry plants in the fall ensures that you'll have them for spring planting!

## **Planting Strawberries**

Choose a cool and cloudy day for planting strawberries.

Give them elbowroom. As well as needing a weed-free bed, strawberry runners need room to stretch.

The strawberry plant that you "set" into the ground is the mother plant.

Prune damaged roots and trim long roots to 4-5 inches in length. Remove all flowers, runners and old leaves. Place the transplants in a container with a small amount of water in the bottom and keep them out of direct sunlight.

Make a wide, shallow hole for the mother plant that covers her roots, being sure to leave about half of her crown (the short stem) exposed. Roots should point down and form a small fan. Firm the soil around each plant and give it a good drink of water. The *system* you use for planting individual plants depends on the type of strawberry you choose.

An important part of knowing how to grow strawberries is understanding the differences in the three strawberry types and how they grow.

## **June Bearing Strawberries**

Popular for their voluptuous fruit and abundant harvest, June bearers produce in the spring. A disadvantage to growing June bearing strawberries is that you won't get a crop the first year.

You can grow June-bearing varieties in either matted rows or hills.

## ***Matted Row System***

For easiest strawberry care and optimum harvest, plant June bearing strawberries 18 to 24 inches apart in rows spaced three to four feet apart. Additionally, planting June bearing strawberries in raised beds allows for good drainage.



Set plants 18 to 24 inches apart in a row (or raised bed), with 3 to 4 feet between rows. Allow runners from *mother* plants to develop and root, forming a matted row about 18 inches wide. Keep the remaining distance between rows clear. Either sweep runners into the row or nip them off at the edge of the aisle. Nip off any runners from the *daughter* plants. During the first season, also pluck all blossoms from your plants to give both mothers and daughters time to become firmly established.

Matted rows that are too dense produce lower yields of smaller berries, have a larger proportion of misshapen berries, and have a higher incidence of disease. Ideally, as they develop, you should position runner plants in a density of about five plants per square foot of matted row. Place a small amount of soil just behind each to keep it in place. Once you achieve this density, remove all other runners.

**Renovation:** In order to insure good fruit production, June-bearing strawberries grown in the matted row system should be renovated every year immediately after harvest.

Mow old foliage with a mower, cutting off the leaves about an inch above the crowns. Remove these cuttings and narrow your rows to six to twelve inches wide by spading, hoeing or tilling. Remove all weeds, old plants, and weak plants, keeping only vigorous year-old plants. Work towards a density of about 5 to 6 plants per square foot of row. Continue monitoring the water supply through the summer and irrigate as necessary.

**Note:** Renovation is not recommended for either day-neutral or ever bearing types of strawberries.

## ***Hill System***

To grow *bigger strawberries*, keep runners pinched back and don't allow them to root. Plant transplants (the mother plants) in hills, pinching off any runners (daughters) to encourage the mother to produce blossoms and fruit. The less work the mother plant has to do to raise her daughters, the more fruitful she will be.

Planting strawberries in hills makes for easier strawberry care and weeding. The other two types of strawberry cultivars, ever-bearing and day-neutral, do well planted in hills since neither sends out many runners. When planting strawberries in hills, nip off all runners. This allows the mother plant to develop more crowns and flower stalks. Plant rows in groups of two to four plants with a two-foot path between rows and the plants spaced at about a foot apart.

Grow both ever-bearing and day-neutral strawberries in a hill system.

## Ever Bearing Strawberries

The name ever-bearing strawberry is a little deceptive for this cultivar isn't "ever bearing," but does produce a nice harvest twice a season, once in spring and once in early autumn. During the first season, pluck all blossoms from ever-bearing cultivars through the end of June. After that, the blossoms will set fruit for a late summer harvest.

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## Day-neutral Strawberries

The third type of strawberry is the day-neutral, which produces small berries all through the summer. Like ever-bearing strawberries, day-neutrals do well when grown in hills. When growing day-neutral strawberries, pluck off only the first set of blossoms and after that allow the fruit to set. Day neutral strawberries are typically smaller but are very sweet! A common day-neutral cultivar is the [Alpine Strawberry](#).

## Strawberry Care

**Watering:** During the growing season, strawberries need about 1 inch of water per week. Water transplants immediately after planting and thereafter any time they receive less than an inch of rainfall per week. Help prevent leaf diseases by watering early in the day, giving foliage a chance to dry before nightfall.

Strawberry plants love water but they can't swim! Keep the soil moist so that your strawberry plants can get a drink when they need one, but never leave them standing in water.

**Fertilization:** Strawberries are what they eat! Along with the characteristics of your strawberry cultivar, how often you fertilize and the ratio you use determines the size of your strawberries.

Strawberries need regular feeding. For big, plump berries, fertilize your strawberry bed at least twice a season. In the spring fertilize before the plants flower and in the fall fertilize shortly after harvest.

Fertilizer has three major components: Nitrogen (N- promotes leaf growth and forms proteins and chlorophyll), Phosphorus (P- contributes to root, flower, and fruit development), and Potassium (K- contributes to stem and root growth and the synthesis of proteins.) So a balanced fertilizer (equal parts of each element i.e. 10-10-10) will encourage over-all growth while one with more phosphorus (i.e. 10-20-10) will help produce bigger berries.

**IMPORTANT:** Do not fertilize strawberry plants during flowering or fruit production.

**Cultivation:** Hand weeding is best because strawberry roots are shallow. If you use a hoe or other tool, be especially careful not to disturb the roots of the plants.

**Mulching:** As well as protecting your strawberries from killing frosts, a 3 to 4-inch layer of hay or straw helps equalize temperatures to protect them from thawing and refreezing after an early spring or mid-winter warm spell. Don't mulch with fallen leaves since they tend to compact and smother new growth. Although many cultivars are hardy to 15F (-10C), your winter mulch layer should be applied before the temperature dips to 20F (-6C) to protect new growth from killing frosts.

Strawberries are very susceptible to spring frosts. Although winter coverings of straw or mulch should be removed in early spring, rake them to the aisles to re-cover the blossoms in case frost is in the forecast. Old blankets or sheets can also be used for protection against frost.

Although strawberries are sun-lovers, their roots need cool, moist soil. Mulch is the best way to achieve this compromise and it also helps keep runners in check and weeds under control. Nevertheless, do not use the straw that covered your strawberries over the winter. Instead, when danger of frost is past, either remove it or work it into the soil. Apply fresh mulch, keeping about one inch from the crowns to prevent damping off.

## Strawberry Harvest

Harvest strawberries as soon as they ripen. Grasp the stem just above the berry between your index finger and thumbnail and pull with a slight twisting motion. Once fruit has begun ripening, check your strawberry bed every other day or daily during hot weather. Pick all ripe berries. Once ripe, fruit quickly decays if left on the plant and invites disease and insect problems.

Don't overfill your containers, jiggle them, or try to pack down the berries. Heaping strawberries results in bruised berries. Avoid washing fruit until just before you use it, to prevent softening and decay.

Pick berries for immediate use any time, but the early morning of a cool, cloudy day is the best time to pick fruit that you intend to store for a day or two. Keep picked berries in the shade and cool them as soon as possible after picking.



At the beginning of the 17th Century, William Butler Wrote,

*"Doubtless God could have made a better berry, but doubtless God never did."*

Today's contemporary gardener reaps the benefits of centuries of strawberry lovers. Although a few of the old-time cultivars such as the Alpine strawberry plant still remain, most strawberry varieties we find at our local nurseries are developed to be the largest and sweetest berries money can buy! In addition, technological advancement in disease control helps horticulturalists develop ever-stronger disease resistant strains of the strawberry plant.

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## About Gardening Guides

HDK-BeheerBV company is the parent company of Gardening-Guides.com. Started in 2004, Gardening-Guides.com is the brainchild of webmaster Hans Dekker. It's his vision to offer you a panoramic view of gardening.



In addition to being the trailblazer for Gardening-Guides.com, Hans is also a talented Internet businessman and owner of Net Research, Netherlands. Starting with just a few articles on Holland bulbs and tulips, Hans has not only used his Internet expertise to grow a virtual garden that holds dozens of cultivars, but he has also cultivated a team of talented writers that provides you with ever-fresh news and insights into every type of gardening you can imagine.

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**Gardening-guides.com**  
**HDK Beheer BV**  
**Kantershof 248**  
**1104GM Amsterdam**  
**Netherlands**