

How to Grow Strawberries

In addition to the traditional strawberry patch, there are as many ways to grow strawberries as there are to eat them! Grow strawberries in a bed, hydroponically, as a ground cover, as an ornamental patio plant, or in a hanging basket.

Strawberry Categories

The Versatile Alpine Strawberry

The Alpine Strawberry is a cousin of the wild strawberry and is very much at home lining a path or walk way. In fact, the only strawberry that is regularly started from seed, the Alpine strawberry is a day neutral cultivar that makes an excellent ground cover with headily fragrant blossoms and very tasty red or *white* strawberries.

The Alpine Strawberry reseeds profusely from its own strawberry seeds and bears fruit throughout the growing season.

An important part of knowing how to grow strawberries is understanding how different types of strawberries grow. Strawberry cultivars are placed in one of three categories.

- **June bearing** strawberries produce a large, voluptuous crop of berries in late spring. Mother plants send out runners (daughters) that root and develop into matted rows. The disadvantage to June bearing strawberries is 1) they only bear fruit once a year and 2) the first year you need to pluck all blossoms from your plants to let them become firmly established.
- **Ever bearing** strawberries really aren't "ever" bearing, but do produce a harvest twice a year, once in spring and again in autumn. During the first year, pluck all blossoms from ever-bearing cultivars through the end of June. After that, they will blossom again and set fruit for a fall harvest.
- **Day neutral** strawberries frequently produce a crop of small, but very sweet berries throughout most of the growing season. After plucking off the first set of blossoms allow the fruit to set and you'll have strawberries throughout the summer!

Buying Strawberries for Transplanting

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. In addition, your nursery may offer wholesale strawberry plants packed in bundles containing as few as 25 plants. 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.

Most strawberry cultivars over-winter if kept cool in a root cellar, unheated garage, or basement. For extra protection, 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!

Thirty plants provide enough strawberries for a family of four. Select your plants carefully and purchase only virus-tested transplants.

Site Selection

Plant strawberries in the sunniest spot you can find. 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.

The shallow rooted strawberry plant is poor competition for weeds, shrubs, trees, or other plants. Till a garden bed in the fall to eliminate a lot of the weeds that cause problems during the growing season. Choose a spot away from large trees, which may send roots into your strawberry bed. Also, be sure to locate your strawberry bed away from any spot where you have grown peppers, tomatoes, eggplant or potatoes. These plants can harbor verticillium wilt, which is devastating to strawberries.

Although strawberries won't thrive in saturated ground, they do need a moist environment. Amend soil with a good supply of nutrient rich organic matter to both improve aeration, drainage, and increase moisture-holding capacity. In the spring, as soon as the frost is out of the ground and the soil is workable, till your bed again. Now you are ready to "set" your strawberry plants.

Planting Strawberries

Choose a cool and cloudy day for planting strawberries. 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. Grow ever bearing and day-neutral varieties in a hill system. You can grow June-bearing varieties in either matted rows or hills.

Matted Row System

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.

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.

Hill System

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.

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.

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.

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.

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

Hydroponic Strawberry Growing

Day-neutral strawberries adapt well to your heated hobby greenhouse. Instead of discarding runners from your strawberry patch, keep those from your healthiest plants for hydroponic growing. Insert the roots into an inert growing medium such as perlite, coconut fiber or Rockwell. Alternatively, you can purchase starter plugs from most hydroponic suppliers. Cover your transplants with a clear plastic dome to keep humidity levels high and keep them out of direct sunlight until roots are established.

Next, simulate a winter for your new seedlings. Dip roots (or plugs) in microbial solution, gently wrap them in clear plastic and refrigerate them for two to five months. After this rest period, your transplants are ready to be added to your hydroponic system.

If possible, grow your hydroponic strawberries in a glassed in porch or green house. However, indoor garden lighting also provides them with the six to seven hours of full spectrum sunlight they need each day. Keep temperatures in a range from 64 to 77F (18 to 25C) for best results.

Nourish your strawberry plants with a commercially prepared organic hydroponic preparation. Although pH should be maintained between 5.8 and 6.2, in lieu of constant testing, changing your solution twice a month typically works as well.

Since you won't be able to depend on honeybees to pollinate your blossoms, you need to hand pollinate. Simply brush the blossoms just after they open, transferring some of the pollen from the stamens to the pistils. Also, use an oscillating fan to help accomplish pollination.

Commercial growers were the forerunners in hydroponic strawberry growing, but with an increase in the availability of home hydroponic systems, the advent of summer doesn't have to mean the end of fresh strawberries.

Hydroponics from the Greek words hydro (water) and ponos (labor) is the science of growing plants without soil. Nutrients that plants usually get from soil are added to water.

Hydroponic systems reduce space requirements and growing time needed to produce a crop. Since there is no soil involved, both the need to till and the need to weed are eliminated. Nutrients used for plant growth are constantly recycled, and the final benefit is that berries can be harvested while standing.

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.

Container Strawberries

Strawberries make superb ornamental plants. Plant either ever bearing or day neutral strawberries in barrels, planters, or hanging baskets. Choose containers with good drainage. A good potting medium is 2-parts soil, 1-part sand and 1-part of peat moss, well-rotted manure, or compost.

Growing strawberries as a hanging plant, is almost easier than planting them in your garden since it puts you in complete control of irrigation and fertilization and keeps your plant far from weeds and harmful pests that occupy garden soils.

Make [Gardening-Guides](#) your first stop for current information on how to grow [Strawberries](#) and all your favorite flowers, fruits, and vegetables!

© 2005 [Gardening-Guides.com](#) All Rights Reserved