

# Grow strawberries in your home garden

**Question:** Our strawberry plants were not very productive this year. What can I do to improve our strawberry beds for next year?

**Answer:** The history of the strawberry plant is interesting. Wild strawberries are indigenous to both Europe and the Western hemisphere. The wild berries were picked and sold in markets in Europe as far back as Roman times. In America, native Americans used the berries before European settlers arrived. When English ships landed in Virginia in 1588, the English found wild strawberries of America to be far superior to those in Europe. Cultivation of wild strawberries began in America as early as 1643 in Massachusetts. During the revolutionary period in 1780, the first American hybrid strawberry, 'Hudson,' was developed. Later in the 19th century, the first step to our present day big-fruited strawberry varieties resulted from a cross of a Virginia wild variety and an imported Chilean wild variety. This cross produced a larger, firmer berry called the pineapple strawberry.

Strawberry plants have a short, compressed stem called a crown. The crown produces a whorl of leaves, inflorescences, or the fruiting structures, branch crowns and the runners or daughter plants. There are three types of strawberries to choose from. First, June-bearers, produce only one crop per year in June or July. Popular cultivars include Hood, totem, Benton and Tillamook. Next, everbearers produce two crops of berries, one in June and the other in the fall. Recommended cultivars include Quinault and Fort Laramie. My favorite, day-neutrals produce fruit almost continuously throughout the growing season. Suggested cultivars include tristar, tribute, and Selva.

Selecting a site for your strawberry bed is important for good production.



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Master Gardener

Strawberries require direct, full sunlight. The best soil is a light, rich loam with plenty of organic matter and a pH level between 6 and 7. The site must have good drainage. Water must not be allowed to stand on a strawberry patch during the winter. If the only soil available is a clay type with poor drainage, you may be able to improve it by tilling and adding organic matter. There are three systems favored for planting strawberries.

The hill system is preferred for everbearers and day-neutrals. In this system, set your plants 12 to 15 inches apart in double- or triple-wide rows. Aisles should be 1 to 2 feet wide. The most recommended system for June-bearers is called a matted-row, where plants are set out about 15 inches apart in a row with 3 feet between the rows.

The matted row system requires less labor to maintain. However, if you let the row get too dense, diseases such as fruit rot can become more of a problem, and the fruit will be smaller. The hill system can produce both high yields and large fruit; provided you diligently remove all runners that are produced before they root. Then, the plants will branch and become very productive. To minimize insect and disease problems with these two systems, it is recommended that you rotate the site every 4 to 5 years.

A third system is to construct a more permanent bed. This method is best for day-neutral plantings. The planting method is the same as for the hill system, but in this method you would allow the runners to fill in the bed and replace the mother plants as they slowdown in production. In older plantings, thin out old and weak plants.



PHOTO COURTESY OF CHRIS RUSCH

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PHOTO COURTESY OF OSU EXTENSION

A large strawberry bed is one of three main methods for growing strawberries at home.

The best planting density is about 5-6 plants per square foot of row. By keeping the plants well-nourished and properly spaced, a vigorous, heavy-bearing strawberry patch can be maintained for many years.

It is best to fertilize established June-bearing strawberries in late summer to

promote growth. Fertilizing June-bearing strawberries in spring is not recommended except in weak plantings. Spring fertilizing results in excessive runner formation and leaf growth. Use a well balanced fertilizer. Day-neutral and everbearing types require fertilizer installments from spring to August.

Strawberries need plenty of water, especially during their bearing period. After the first season, there are two critical times when good soil moisture is important. The first is from just after bloom through harvest, to ensure berries swell to maximum possible size. The other is when the plant resumes growth and forms flower buds for the following season's crop.

Renovation improves the next season's crop. It helps invigorate the plants and reduces pest and disease problems. Renovation involves removing the old leaves, narrowing the rows, and fertilizing. Mowing is the preferred method for removing old foliage. Set the mower low enough to cut off the old leaves, but high enough so as not to damage the crowns. This is done after harvest in the late summer.

Cover your strawberries with a light layer of mulch over winter to help control weeds.

You can also plant strawberries in barrels, planters, or hanging baskets, though fruit production in hanging baskets might be disappointing.

These plantings require close care in watering, fertilizing and other cultural steps. Day-neutral types are best suited for container production. You will need to remove runners. Container soil mixtures should permit excellent drainage. A slow release fertilizer should also be incorporated into your potting mix.

Growing strawberries in your home garden can be an interesting and rewarding experience. By growing various cultivars of strawberry, you can pick ripe fruit from late spring until frost. If you care for your plants properly, you can obtain enough berries for your family from a relatively small area.

*Do you have a gardening question? Please email, call, or visit the Douglas County Master Gardener Plant Clinic at [douglasmg@oregonstate.edu](mailto:douglasmg@oregonstate.edu), 541-672-4461, or 1134 S.E. Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.*