

# Strawberries for the Pacific Northwest Garden

By Kathleen Olson

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**Choose the right varieties and enjoy berries all season long.**

A feast for the senses, deliciously sweet, fragrant and colorful; strawberries (*Fragaria ananassa*) are also the easiest fruit to grow in the Pacific Northwest. And berries grown here are far superior in every way, except size, to those grown in California, Mexico and places beyond. By choosing the right varieties for your home garden, you can enjoy fresh strawberries all summer long. Select a second cultivar that freezes well for later use in pies, cobblers, smoothies and as ice cream topping. Or consider a variety that is well suited for jams and jellies; the deeply red internal color of Northwest berries is prized by home canners and commercial producers alike.

## Types of strawberries

### June-bearing

For simplicity, strawberry cultivars can be separated into two types. Type one is June-bearing, which sets its flower buds in August and September, blooming and fruiting the following year in a three-week period during June and July. The June-bearing varieties are known for their exceptional fruit quality: sweetness, complexity of flavor and beautiful red color. They bear fruit only once each year, and yields are high: You'll have loads of berries.

### Ever-bearing and day-neutral

Type two includes both ever-bearing and day-neutral varieties. These are slightly different, but most nurseries don't make a distinction. Ever-bearing refers to varieties that focus their production in June and again in October. Day-neutrals produce fruit throughout the season, though yields decline in the heat of late summer. For the home gardener, considering ever-bearing and day-neutrals as one category works well. Basically, you'll harvest berries all season long, enjoying fresh strawberries for a good four months. Several of these cultivars are good for freezing and preserves, so you can gradually take care of this work over the summer. In terms of quality, the ever-bearing and day-neutral berries can't quite match the succulence of the very best June-bearers. But they aren't far off the mark, and you get to eat them all summer.

## Selecting cultivars

Some of the best strawberries in the world are grown right here in the Skagit Valley. That's good news for gardeners, because we benefit from the ongoing breeding and testing programs run by Washington State University Mount Vernon Northwestern Washington Research and Extension Center. Cultivars developed by this regional program are noted for their incredible sweet flavor, lovely fragrance and superior red color.

Many gardeners start by selecting a June-bearing cultivar and complementing that choice with an ever-bearing/day-neutral variety with different fruit characteristics. For example, grow June-bearing Hood, a regional favorite known for its sweetness. This is a great variety for fresh eating, and it makes wonderful preserves. Complement Hood with Tristar, one of the most flavorful ever-bearing varieties. Tristar's fruit is fairly firm, so it freezes well, in addition to being a great eating berry.

### June-bearing cultivars

- **Benton:** A cold-hardy variety, with good flavor and quality. The berries are soft. High yielding with good mildew and virus resistance. Late bearing.
- **Hood:** A favorite fresh-eating variety with extremely sweet, creamy flesh. Bears large fruit in early June. Good for preserves. Is highly susceptible to viruses.
- **Puget Reliance:** More acidic flavor, so not as good fresh, but excellent in jams and jellies. Vigorous grower, good producer, resistant to viruses and root rots.
- **Puget Summer:** Sweet flavor, similar to Hood, but later ripening. Low rate of fruit rot.
- **Shuksan:** Very cold-hardy, large fruit, best cultivar for freezing. Fruits mid-season. Good virus resistance.
- **Totem:** The most widely planted cultivar in the Skagit Valley, grown mainly for processing. Good flavor quality, color and yields. Growth habit is upright, holding fruits off the ground, which minimizes fruit rot. Early producer.

### Ever-bearing/day-neutral cultivars

- **Albion:** New variety with high yields and good quality fruit.
- **Quinalt:** From British Columbia, soft fruit, good flavor, best for fresh eating, not good for freezing. Produces lots of runners which fruit prolifically. Extraordinary virus resistance. Large June and small fall crop.
- **Seascape:** Good flavor in early season is enhanced as weather gets colder. Large, firm fruit is great for dipping in chocolate. High yields throughout the season; excellent virus resistance.
- **Tristar:** Sweet and aromatic fruit with good firmness and color, average fruit size. Fruit is firm, so it's great for freezing. Tolerates both cold and heat. Bears all season, but most heavily in fall.
- **Tribute** – Delicious but tiny fruit; flavor superior to Quinalt. Starts fruiting after Tristar, but has a long harvest season.

## Basic strawberry cultivation

### Planting

Select certified disease-free plants from a good nursery. Strawberries are herbaceous perennials that typically exhaust themselves after 4 or 5 years. Buy new plants at that point, rather than taking runners from an old plant—they often are diseased. Strawberries need well-drained soil that receives sun all day. Add 1 pound of 10-20-20 fertilizer per 100 square feet (or half that amount of manure) before planting.

Matted rows are typically used for June-bearing cultivars, while hill systems are the most common planting method for ever-bearing/day-neutral varieties. For matted rows, set plants 15 inches apart with 3-4 feet between rows. Allow the runners to take root to form a mat 18 inches wide, keeping clear the remaining 1½ to 2½ feet between rows. Remove all the flower clusters the first year, so plants can send energy into establishing growth.

Ever-bearing/day neutral plants focus on producing multiple harvests, rather than sending out runners. They grow well on a hill system. Build a raised soil area about 8 inches high and 2 feet wide. Plant 12-15 inches apart in staggered double rows. Hills should have an aisle between them about 2 feet wide. Remove all the runners during the growing season. Remove blossoms until July 1, then allow to fruit.



Photo by Kathleen Olson



Photo by Jason Miller.

(Photo to left) **For success with strawberries, give your plants well-drained soil in a sunny spot. Fertilize well, water weekly and pull out any weeds. (Photo above) Some of the best strawberries in the world are grown right here in the Skagit Valley. Choose one or more cultivars to accommodate your needs, from fresh eating to freezing to preserves.**

## Growing

Strawberry plants must have water during the growing season—an inch per week is the baseline. Do not let them experience stress from lack of water. Drip watering is preferable to overhead watering to discourage fruit molding and other diseases. If growth is weak and leaves are light green instead of dark, add nitrogen 6 weeks after planting: broadcast ammonium nitrate at  $\frac{1}{2}$  pound per 100 square feet of row. Keep weeds at bay: hoe often. Weeds rob your berries of nutrition and water.

## Harvesting

Pick berries at least every other day; each day if the weather is warm. Pick all the ripe (and overripe) berries. This will prevent mold and diseases from forming. Refrigerate immediately after picking and wait to wash the fruit until right before use.