

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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With those plump but not-so-flavorful strawberries creeping back onto the supermarket shelves, no doubt your thoughts are turning to the possibility of juicy, flavorful morsels from your own garden. Now is the time to prepare a bed for this easy-to-grow and most favored of the home garden fruits.

You decide...an ongoing crop or a one-shot harvest?

There are three main types of strawberries. All are members of the *Rosaceae* family and are easy to identify with their round, toothed, soft green leaves and white flowers.

- *June-bearers* produce one high-quality crop per year in late spring or early summer
- *Everbearers* produce two crops (one in June/early July and the second in the autumn)
- *Day-neutrals* produce almost continuously throughout the growing season

Everbearers and *Day-neutrals* produce fruit that is usually smaller than that of the *June-bearers*; however, their growth habit allows us to enjoy fruit throughout most of the growing season.

Assess your site for sun, soil and water requirements

Most strawberry varieties prefer full sun. If soil drains well, plant on flat ground. If soil is heavy or poorly drained, mounds or raised beds may be better. If soil is bad, or if your space is limited, containers are a good option.

Planting on a slope provides good air circulation and minimizes frost injury to the early flowers in the spring. A slope also provides better drainage and minimizes root rot resulting from standing water after rain.

Although strawberries require good drainage, they are shallow rooted and should never be stressed by a shortage of water. New plants must be well irrigated throughout their first season and all strawberry plants require consistent water, one inch per week, during the growing season. Drip irrigation is ideal to help reduce disease problems, but overhead irrigation is satisfactory. Remember, good irrigation is far more important than fertilizer.

Buy starts when they appear at the nurseries

Varieties tend to have specific soil and climate requirements so get advice before selecting your plants. Choose certified disease-free plants from a reputable source. To minimize fungal diseases such as fruit rot, choose varieties with erect fruiting habits. As a reminder, it is better to purchase virus-free plants than to use plants from an unknown source and of uncertain health.

Prepare the bed and plant

Early spring, as soon as the ground can be worked, is a good time to set strawberries. Prepare the soil carefully as for a vegetable garden. A good supply of organic material worked into the soil improves aeration, drainage, and water-holding capacity. Before planting, apply 10-20-20 (or equivalent) fertilizer at a rate of one pound per 100 sq. ft.

Weeds must be controlled from the outset or the bed will be a failure. It will become impossible to remove them once the berries are established.

There are two layouts for planting strawberry beds. The most common method for *June-bearers* is to grow them in *matted rows*. Set plants 15 inches apart in rows three to four feet apart. As runner plants develop, space them around the mother plant about six inches from each other, until the row is 18 inches wide, and remove any new runner plants that develop. Keep the space between rows clear by cutting off late-forming runners. A row of spaced plants is more productive than an overcrowded one.

The second method is the *hill system*. Plants are set in beds of two, three or four rows, with 12-15 inches between plants and aisles one-and-one-half to two feet wide. Runner plants are removed as they appear. This method is the most productive method and is ideal for *Everbearers* and *Day-neutrals* as they produce fewer runners.

To plant, dig a hole for each plant large enough to place the roots straight downward but somewhat spread. The midpoint of the crown should be level with the soil surface, and the top root should be just below the soil surface. Irrigate the plants as soon as they're planted.

Fertilize

Feed June-bearers twice a year—very lightly when growth begins and again, more heavily, after fruiting. Everbearing types prefer consistent light feedings. Heavy feeding of either type in spring leads to excessive plant growth, soft fruit, and fruit rot.

Mulch for weed control

After planting, you may want to add sawdust or black polyethylene mulch to deter weeds, conserve moisture, and keep berries clean. If polyethylene is used, plants are set through holes in the polyethylene, or the polyethylene can be laid on the ground adjacent to the row of plants.

During the spring in which planting is done, all flower clusters should be removed to prevent fruiting; many experts believe the plants should not be permitted to fruit until their second season. If you just can't wait to taste your berries, try to pick off blossoms until at least July 1 of the first year.

Strawberries can be subject to insect pests, but the largest pest problem may be with the neighborhood birds as they swoop down to eat the delicious berries as they ripen. The only effective control measure is to cover the berries with netting as the fruit ripens. Plan to have the nets on hand so your precious crop won't go to the birds.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Cooperative Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.
