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STRAWBERRIES FOR THE HOME GARDEN

By Wesley P. Judkins

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Delicious strawberries can be grown in the home garden. The fruits are high in vitamin C, and are excellent for eating fresh, for freezing, or for making jam. Also, what is more tempting than strawberry pie or shortcake?

Strawberries will produce more fruit in a small space than almost any other berry crop. Twenty-five plants are enough for a row 40 feet long. This small number should produce 25 or more quarts of berries next spring if planted this year.

Selection of Varieties and Planting

Select several varieties to give early, midseason, and late harvest. Earlidawn or Earlibelle are the best varieties for Eastern Virginia, and Sunrise is suggested as the best early strawberry for Western Virginia. Guardian or Redchief are recommended for midseason ripening, and Marlate is one of the best late varieties. Purchase only virus-free plants to ensure vigorous growth.

You will find strawberries are an easy crop to raise on fertile, well-drained soil. To improve the nutrient level, broadcast about four pounds of 5-10-5 fertilizer on the garden and rototill it into the soil before planting your strawberries.

Strawberries should be planted in the spring several weeks before the average date of the last frost in your locality. Set the plants 18 inches apart, in rows four feet apart.

The easiest way to set strawberry plants is to push a pointed shovel into the soil to the full depth of the blade. Pull the shovel to one side to make a V-shaped opening. Spread the roots of the plant like a fan and extend them to their full length along the exposed soil surface. Withdraw the shovel and push the soil back against the roots, pressing it down firmly with the foot.

Be sure to have the crown of the plant level with the surrounding soil. If set too low, soil may wash over the crown during a rainstorm and smother the plant. If set too high, the top part of the roots will be exposed and the plant will make poor growth.

Care During the First Summer

Pick off any flowers which develop during the first summer. The plant needs to use all of its food materials for the formation of runners which will produce fruit next year. Even if you left the flowers and secured a few berries this year, they would be small and of poor quality.

Within a few weeks your strawberries will start to develop runners. If allowed to grow without interference they will form a matted row two or three feet wide. Or, you may space them about six inches apart as they develop roots. After you have secured a band type row of evenly spaced plants about two feet wide, all other runners should be removed as they are formed. The spaced row will produce somewhat larger and higher quality berries than the matted row.

Weeds and grass must be controlled in the strawberry planting. Cultivate or hoe between the rows, and pull weeds from between the plants. The cultivation must be very shallow to avoid damage to the roots of the strawberries.

Your strawberries must continue to grow vigorously during the summer and fall to develop large crowns with flower buds for the crop next summer. Apply water during dry periods. If the foliage becomes somewhat light green in July, apply a sidedressing of 5-10-5 fertilizer and water thoroughly.

#### Winter Mulching

Strawberries should be mulched during the winter to reduce damage by heaving or freezing. Use clean straw which is free of weed seeds, or pine needles. Apply the mulch after the ground first freezes in the fall when the plants have become hardened for the winter. This will be 6 weeks or more after the average date of the first fall frost. Apply an even layer over the entire planting. Use 2 inches of straw or 1 inch of pine needles. Do not use a heavy mulch, or material like leaves which would pack down and smother the plants.

When the plants start to grow in the spring, about 2 weeks before the average date of the last frost, about half the mulch should be removed from over the plants and left between the rows. Inspect your plants under the mulch and remove it when the center leaves start to grow. Do not allow these leaves to become yellow, or the plants may be damaged by the sun when the mulch is removed.

The plants will grow up through the light mulch left on the rows. This mulch around the plants, and the heavier layer between the rows, will keep the berries clean, conserve soil moisture, and help check weed growth.

#### Renovation

The best crop of large berries will be produced in the late spring and early summer one year after the plants were set out. If your strawberry planting is making vigorous growth, and is free of weeds, it may be retained for a second crop to be harvested 2 years after the planting was established.

As soon as the first crop is harvested, broadcast 3 pounds of 5-10-5 fertilizer per 100 square feet over the entire planting. Rototill or dig between the rows to incorporate the fertilizer and mulch into the top few inches of soil, and destroy weeds. If the matted row is quite thick, the plants may be thinned to about 6 inches apart.

#### Harvesting

To secure highest quality, harvest strawberries when the fruit is firm but has developed full red color. During warm weather, the berries will need to be picked daily. They may be kept for several days in a refrigerator.

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