

Grow Your Own Strawberries

When and where to plant strawberries

The best results come from planting strawberry plants in early September, but they may also be planted in early April.



They prefer a well-dug, free draining soil and a sunny position. A raised bed is ideal.

If possible, prepare the soil at least one month before planting. Incorporate as much organic matter as possible, but don't use a lot of manure as over-enriched soils tend to grow lots of leaves instead of fruits. Both heavy and light soils benefit from leaf mould and strawberries thrive in it. Work in a 5cm layer of leaf mould to the top 10cm of soil just before planting.

Strawberries are happy to be grown in containers or growbags, but care must be taken that they don't dry out or become water-logged.

What to buy

Buy plants from a reputable nursery because strawberries are very prone to disease. It is a false economy to accept nameless runners from a well-meaning friend.

Varieties

The following varieties all have the Royal Horticultural Society's Award of Garden Merit:

'Aromel' Good flavour; crops over long period, but can be erratic. Season: July–Oct. (but only a few berries per plant at any one time)

'Alice' a good consistent cropper, with a high percentage of mid to large, sweet, juicy fruit. Scored well in taste tests and performed well at different geographical locations in trials. Has good resistance to verticillium wilt; very useful to home gardener. Mid to late season.

'Cambridge Favourite' good flavour; medium size, but rather soft berries. Moderate crops; excellent resistance to disease. Mid season.

'Hapil' large glossy berries; good flavour. Heavy crops; vigorous. Susceptible to verticillium wilt. Early/mid season.

'Honeoye' excellent flavour. Heavy crops; susceptible to verticillium wilt. Early season.

'Pegasus' good flavour; quite soft flesh. Good disease resistance; tolerance to verticillium wilt. Mid season.

'Rhapsody' good flavour; medium to large berries. Resistance to red core; some resistance to verticillium wilt and mildew. Late season.

'Symphony' good flavour; bright, firm berries. Vigorous; good resistance to red core; susceptible to mildew. Mid to late season

How to plant

They should be planted to the same depth as they have grown in their pots - if planted too low in the ground, the growing crown may rot, too high and the roots may dry out. Space them 35-45cm apart within rows and 75cm

between rows, allowing wider spacing on richer soils. Firm the soil gently round the plants.

Problems

Strawberries have many pests and problems including aphids, red spider mite, slugs, powdery mildew and botrytis. These are all more likely to happen if the plants are overcrowded or in waterlogged soil.

In spring, as growth begins, clear away any dead leaves and start checking regularly for aphids and other pests in the crown and elsewhere. If plants remain stunted and fail to grow, remove them immediately to the bin or bonfire, as they are showing clear signs of virus. Do not compost them.

Protecting the Fruit

As the fruit begins to develop, their weight will cause them to lay on the ground. Before this happens (but no earlier than necessary), cover the soil around the plants with straw. This keeps moisture in the soil and will prevent the fruits from lying directly on the soil which will rot them.

The plants need to be protected from birds (when the fruits begin to swell) with lightweight plastic netting. This should be held clear of the plants by tying it to short wooden posts and securing the netting to them.

Ongoing care

Summer fruiting strawberries planted in spring should have their first blooms pinched off to enable a good root system to be established. Strawberries planted in September can be left to flower and fruit in their first summer.

Spring: feeding strawberries is not needed if you spread a layer of well-rotted compost around the plants in early spring. Feeding with a nitrogen rich feed will only encourage leaf growth at the expense of fruit growth.

May: the plant will produce runners which have little plantlets along them. The runners should be removed regularly because they will sap the strength from the plant resulting in less fruit.

When the fruits start to swell: water if dry, but strawberries don't like being water-logged.

Autumn: after cropping clear up the bed by cutting back all foliage (leaving a stump of 10cm or so) and removing it, and any straw, to the compost heap. Take care not to cut so deeply into the plant that the crowns are damaged.

Propagation

Strawberries are very prone to disease, so it's best to keep the plants no longer than 3 years and then have them in another part of the garden. For the same reason, although propagation is very easy, it may be better to buy new stock.

Propagating strawberries is simplicity itself. The plant sends out long runners upon which a new little strawberry plantlet forms. Peg this down on the surface of the compost in a small pot and it will develop roots on its own. Then about three weeks after it has rooted, cut the runner attaching it to this parent plant. Keep the potted strawberry plant in a light position, keep the soil moist and feed with a nitrogen based liquid fertiliser every two weeks. If the plants outgrow the pot (the roots start popping out of the base of the pot) then pot into a slightly larger pot. Around September time plant the potted strawberry plant into its final position.