



Bucks Country Gardens

Planting Strawberries

Few fruits are as delectable as a strawberry grown to perfection and picked fully ripe. They are easy to grow, and if you grow the everbearing types (including the popular day-neutrals), they will reward you quickly, bearing fruit the same season they are planted. The June-bearing types should form strong plants their first season and fruit the following year. Regardless of the type of strawberries you grow, expect a quart of fruit from each plant.

Choose your planting site carefully. Strawberries grow best in moist, well-drained soil in full sun. If you can, avoid low-lying areas where spring frosts are apt to injure the early blossoms. If you can't avoid such a site, you will have to protect your plants with a blanket or plastic sheet when frost threatens. It's also best to avoid ground where grass, tomatoes, peppers, egg-plants, or potatoes were growing recently, as these plants harbor pests that may linger in the soil and damage your strawberry crop. If you have no choice, go ahead and plant your strawberries anyway on the chance that pests aren't present.

PREPARING THE SOIL

The soil in even the best of sites often needs preparation. Work when the soil is moist but not sodden. Till it to a depth of half a foot or more, removing as many perennial weeds and their roots as possible as you go. Doing so now will save you work later, for strawberries have shallow roots that cannot compete with weeds and are easily damaged by hoeing. Strawberries' shallow roots are also incapable of reaching very far for water or nutrients. To help the soil retain water and to supply some nutrients, spread a two-inch layer of organic matter (peat moss, leaf mold, compost, or well-rotted manure) on top of the bed. Further supplement your plants' diet by sprinkling on a granular 10-10-10 fertilizer at the rate of three pounds per 100 square feet. Thoroughly mix these amendments into the soil with a shovel or rototiller.

If your soil drains poorly, rake the prepared soil into a raised bed six inches high and two feet wide. If you're making more than one bed, leave 18-inch paths between them.

PREPARING THE PLANTS

Strawberry plants are usually sold in bare-root bundles. If you cannot plant them immediately, moisten the roots and store the bundles in a plastic bag in the refrigerator. When you are ready to plant, take a pair of scissors and cut all the roots of each bundle back to four inches. Shortening the roots in this manner makes planting easier. Old roots will become nonfunctional anyway as new roots form higher up. Next, open each bundle and inspect the plants. If they have leaves (they may not), pull off all but two or three of the youngest ones on each plant – this will reduce water in the bottom and drape a damp cloth over them.

SETTING THE PLANTS IN THE GROUND

An individual strawberry plant requires a square foot of space. Strawberries produce runners (horizontal stems with new plants along their length), so if you set the plants a foot apart, you'll need to trim off all runners as they form. Alternatively, you can set the plants a couple of feet apart and allow the runners to fill the spaces in between. Your first harvest will be greater with the former plan, but you'll have to purchase more plants. (Note that June bearers produce more runners than everbearers do.)

Plant by plunging a trowel straight down into the soil with the concave side facing you. Pull the handle toward you to open a slit in the ground. Fan out the roots and place them in the opened slit, taking care they don't bend as you set them in. Then set the top of the crown just above the soil line. Any deeper and the crown will not rot; any shallower and the roots will dry out.

Remove the trowel and firm the soil with the heel of your hand to ensure good contact between roots and soil. Give each plant a pint of water to settle the soil and to get it off to a good start. Finally, double-check the planting depth.

CARING FOR THE PLANTS

Strawberries enjoy cool, moist soil, so tuck a two-inch layer of straw or pine needles around each plant. This mulch also will suppress weeds and will keep the berries clean when they appear. Soon your plants will begin to grow, producing leaves and flowers. Diligently pinch off all flower buds to force the plants to put their energy into growth instead of reproduction. Pinch everbearers for about three months, then stop and allow subsequent flowers to go on to produce berries. Pinch June bearers until flowering ceases in early summer, and expect a bountiful harvest the following year.