

# GROWING STRAWBERRIES

**“Doubtless God could have made a better berry, but doubtless God never did” - the wise words of sixteenth century gourmand William Butler. And who can argue? Strawberries are delicious, nutritious and easy to grow if you follow a few easy rules.**

First, some fruity facts:

- They're not berries at all! Botanically, berries have internal seeds, whereas strawberries carry theirs (usually about 200 per fruit) on the outside.
- The scientific family of strawberries is *Fragaria*, which means fragrant in Latin. *Fragaria* is part of the rose family which includes apples and plums.
- Strawberries are packed with vitamin C, are a good source of folic acid and potassium and are very low in calories. Apparently, fresh juice has a cooling effect on people with fevers.



## Site and soil

Strawberries prefer full sun to grow well and to ripen the fruit. They like a well drained, slightly acidic soil that has been enriched with plenty of compost and well rotted animal manure. Regular application of liquid fertiliser (eg seaweed fertiliser or compost tea) will also encourage production.

## Planting

Strawberries need plenty of space to grow. Suggested spacing is in rows about 75 cm apart, with about 30 cm between plants. Plant with the crown at soil level and water in well.

In our climate, it's common to plant strawberries in autumn, for a first crop in late spring. Try planting a mix of different varieties to enable harvesting from spring to autumn. Red Gauntlet is a popular and productive starting point.

If planting directly into garden beds, raise the beds to allow good drainage. Strawberries also grow very well in planter boxes, barrels, hanging baskets and pots, making them ideal for small gardens, decks or verandahs.

## Cultivating

Strawberries are shallow-rooted, so will need frequent watering in hot conditions, particularly if they are in pots.

(especially terracotta pots).

To keep fruit and leaves clean and dry, put straw around the base of each plant. This will also help keep weeds under control and hold soil moisture. Remove any diseased fruit or leaves as soon as you see them.

Strawberry plants will send out runners during the growing season (interestingly, the Anglo-Saxon word *strawberige* apparently means 'inclined to stray'). These can either be pinched off to conserve the plant's energy for fruit production, or be used to propagate new plants for the next season. Peg them down while they're still attached and once they've formed roots, gently separate and transplant.

## Harvesting

Pick fruit as soon as it's ripe to prevent it rotting on the plant, and to beat the birds. It's best to harvest in dry weather. Be gentle when harvesting to avoid bruising and make sure you keep the stalk with the fruit.

After harvest, cut back old leaves to allow sun to reach the centre of the plant, and remove the mulch or straw that was protecting the fruit. Feed and water to prepare the plant for the next season.

## Problems

Birds and slugs are a strawberry's main pests. For the former, it may be necessary to cover plants with a net or cloche when they start to ripen. An old-fashioned slug hunt is the best remedy for the latter.

The most important rule for preventing disease in strawberries is to start with certified virus-free plants or runners. Expect plants to remain healthy and productive for three years. Replace plants after that in a new location, to ensure that soil based diseases are not transferred to new plants. Some gardeners suggest a three year rotation, with a new row planted, and a row left fallow each year.

## Choosing and using

Choose fruit that is brightly coloured and glossy, that smells good, that has no soft or white spots and that has its green stems still attached.

Eat strawberries as soon as you can - this isn't usually too difficult!. You can refrigerate them, but only for a couple of days. Wash fruit just before eating (with the stem caps on), not before storing.

If you have the will power not to eat them *au naturel*, try them in jam, coulis, tarts, cakes, daiquiris, or with ice cream, cream, yoghurt, champagne or chocolate - or all of the above.



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