

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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How to Make No-Cook Freezer Jam

If you've never made freezer jam before, hopefully you'll give it a try. It's just too easy. And imagine how wonderful some fresh berry jam would taste spread on toast or swirled into yogurt! Or even add a dollop of jam to a steaming hot waffle, along with some freshly whipped and sweetened cream. Yum!

INGREDIENTS

5 cups strawberries, cut into 2.5cm pieces
(about 1kg strawberries washed, hulled and cut up – measure after cutting)

1 Tbsp lemon zest (the zest from about 1 large lemon)

¼ cup lemon juice (the juice from about 1 large lemon)

3½ tsp gelatin

¼ cup honey

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Prep all the strawberries. Place 1 cup of strawberries in a blender or food processor and puree until mostly smooth.
2. Pour lemon juice into a medium-size stock pot. Sprinkle gelatin on top of the lemon juice. Set the timer for 2 minutes.
3. Pour the pureed strawberries into the pot and turn the stove on medium-low.

(You are NOT cooking the mixture. This is merely to warm the gelatin so it is not lumpy and will dissolve evenly among the jam.)

4. Warm the mixture for about 5 minutes, stirring often until the gelatin is completely dissolved.
5. Remove from the heat.
6. If you want a smooth jam, pulse the remaining strawberries in a food processor or blender until desired texture. If you want a chunky jam, add the remaining strawberries to the pot and mash with a potato masher or the bottom of a glass.
7. Add the lemon zest and honey and stir well to combine.
8. Carefully pour the jam into pint glass jars and place in the fridge overnight. Jam is good for at least a week in the fridge. Store in the freezer for long-term storage.



OR TRY A FUN ACTIVITY FOR THE KIDS: CHOCOLATE COVERED STRAWBERRIES

You will need:

20-25 Whole Strawberries
350 gram milk chocolate chips
Assorted sprinkles
Parchment paper
Kitchen paper towels

You'll want to start out with some clean, juicy strawberries. Rinse them off and dry them with some paper towels. Be sure the strawberries are completely dry before you start the dipping process.

Microwave the chocolate chips in a microwave safe bowl for one minute. Remove from microwave and stir until the chips melt. The chocolate chips may need to more time to completely melt. If so, microwave them at 10 second intervals, stirring in between.

If you have your child helping, you will want to be sure the bowl and chocolate aren't too hot for them to dip. Hold the strawberry by the green leafy tip and dip into the bowl of melted chocolate. You can dip as much or as little as you like. Shake off the excess chocolate back into the bowl.

At this point your child can really personalize their strawberries. If you'd like them encrusted in sprinkles, simply pour some in a small bowl and dip your strawberry in right after dipping it in the melted chocolate.

Place the strawberries on some parchment paper so the chocolate can harden. If you have an extra leftover you can store them in the refrigerator.

