

Strawberry Planting and Care

By: Kelly Feehan, Extension Educator

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Strawberries are an easy to grow fruit for home gardens. They are so easy to grow that strawberry beds often become a dense mass of pretty plants with some but not a lot of fruit.

For higher fruit production, strawberries need full sun and annual thinning. Within two weeks after harvest, and later in the season, thinning is needed to prevent strawberry beds becoming overcrowded. Overcrowding is common because strawberries produce many runners or daughter plants.

There are three types of strawberries. June-bearing strawberries produce one large crop in June. They are the highest yielding. Good cultivars to grow include Earliglow, Honeoye, Cavendish, and Jewel. This article mainly focuses on June-bearers.

Everbearing strawberries like Ogallala and Ozark Beauty produce two lighter crops, one in early summer and a second in late summer. Day neutral plants like Tristar and Tributer produce a small amount of fruit throughout the summer.

Select a full sun location for strawberries. Ten or more hours of sunlight a day is best. Six hours of direct sunlight is the minimum. Before planting, amend the soil by incorporating compost 8 inches deep. Sandy loam is ideal but incorporating compost into a sandy or a clay soil will improve both.

Dormant, bare root plants are best planted in April. Potted strawberry plants can be planted in May before hot weather arrives and after the danger of frost. On average, this is around May 9 in eastern Nebraska. Plant strawberries 12 to 18 inches apart in rows spaced 3 to 4 feet apart.

In the spring of planting, pinch off all flower buds that appear in the first month. This allows plants to establish roots and develop foliage before they need to support flowers and fruits.

As runners begin to appear in summer, place these where you want plants to fill in and pressed them down into the soil to encourage rooting. If too many runners are produced, cut some off with a scissors or pruning shears. If very few runners are produced, the plants likely need nitrogen.

Maintaining plant and row spacing by thinning is important for fruit production. More sunlight will reach the plants and there is less competition for moisture and nutrients. Air flow is also improved to reduce common diseases of strawberries.

On established beds, thin plants 6 to 8 inches apart after harvest each year. June-bearing plants will continue to produce runners up until frost so thin the bed again in late summer.

If strawberries are grown in rows, which is best for maximum fruit yield, shortly after harvest is the time to thin rows to a width of 12 to 18 inches. Place organic mulch between rows to manage weeds and conserve soil moisture. A 1 to 2-inch layer of dried grass clippings works well. Clippings from lawns that herbicides have recently been applied to should not be used.

On established beds, mow the plants shortly after harvest. This helps control diseases by removing older leaves infected by leaf spot or fruit rot fungi. It also improves air flow around plants. Set the mower high enough so plant crowns are not damaged. Catch and remove the old leaves from the bed.

June-bearing strawberries are best fertilized right after harvest is complete. Throughout the summer, provide adequate water and don't overlook thinning plants as needed. This will help avoid the bed turning into a dense mass of pretty plants with a small amount of fruit production.