

The Backyard Strawberry Patch

Fragrant sun-ripe strawberries are the heart's desire of many home gardeners. You won't find the best varieties available in your local supermarket, because the qualities that make them great eating make them too tender for commercial production. Backyard strawberries are best adapted to being hand picked at the peak of ripeness and flavor and then quickly popped into your mouth or onto a warm shortcake. The instructions here are for planting and maintaining a small backyard strawberry patch.

There are two basic types of strawberries, the Junebearers and the Everbearers. The traditional Everbearers produced a crop in June and another in late summer. These varieties set buds in response to the day length. Modern everbearing strawberries are now day-neutral, meaning they set buds continuously all season without regard to the day length. Each type is handled differently in commercial culture, but all types are best treated the same in backyard culture. Start with the varieties that are easily available and when the patch needs renovation in about three years, try some others. There are definitely differences in flavor. You will find your own favorites.

Strawberry Varieties

When you purchase strawberries for a home garden, your choice will probably be dictated by what is available locally. Strawberries are sold either actively growing or as dormant root systems called crowns. The berry descriptions can be mouth watering, but the best plan is to choose first from varieties that are well adapted to our growing conditions. Some very taste ones recommended for Wisconsin include the Junebearers "Honeoye" and "Sparkle", traditional Everbearers like "Ogallala" and "Fort Laramie" and the day neutral "Tribute" and "Tristar". Look for healthy plants or root systems. If you get your plants from an older strawberry patch, transplant only vigorous young healthy plants to your new bed.

Preparing the Bed for Planting

Strawberry plants are set out in early spring as soon as your ground can be worked. Before you buy yours, prepare the bed. Strawberries need full sun and good drainage. A slightly sloping site will insure that the area is not a frost trap in early spring that can damage the flower buds. Work compost into the bed. Research has shown that composted leaves as an additive have helped keep down strawberry diseases. Don't choose to plant strawberries where you have grown tomatoes, potatoes, peppers or eggplants. Their diseases can be transmitted to the strawberries.