STRAWBERRIES IN THE HOME GARDEN

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Most people in the Northeastern US look forward to the early days of summer when local strawberries are available. In spite of the fact that fresh strawberries are now available year-round due to improved transportation and storage, consumers know that the texture and flavor of local berries is usually superior. The biggest challenge for both home and commercial growers is to control weeds. However, with a little care, the weeds can be managed.

The first step in growing strawberries is selecting and preparing a site. This ideally starts about a year before planting. A site with less chance for frost (not at the base of a hill, and not uphill behind a wall on an inclined site) and well drained of water, but with water available for irrigation would be ideal. A loamy soil with a neutral pH is good. Weed control should be started the year before planting by using herbicides, light surface cultivation, and possibly black plastic to cover the area. Deer control and irrigation should be planned.

Selection of the proper varieties of strawberries is equally important as site preparation. There are two classes of varieties that can be chosen, day-neutral, and summer-bearing. The advantage of day-neutral plants is that they will produce berries in the same year that they are planted, and they have three peaks of production during the summer. I have found 'Seascape' to be a good day-neutral variety for our area since it produces good quality, large fruit, doesn't runner excessively, and is vigorous enough that one doesn't have to thin blossoms when plants are young. Some people like to grow summer-bearing berries because they tend to be larger than day-neutrals. These berries only fruit once in the season and must be planted the year before they bear. Many varieties are available, and their descriptions can be found in the plant catalogs.

Dormant plants are easy to work with in the spring. They are normally planted in April. They should be planted at the same depth they were growing in the nursery and spaced about 12 inches apart in rows or a patch. Runners are removed as they appear. The plants will benefit from either plastic or organic mulch. I sometimes put down newspapers and cover them with wood chips or straw. The mulch helps with the water balance in the soil, and in controlling weeds. Using compost or chemical fertilizer are common ways to fertilize plants. Day-neutral plants can be fertilized frequently throughout the season, while summer-bearing plants are fertilized at planting or renovation, and again in September.

Day neutral plants are normally left in the ground 1-2 years, then dug up and replaced with a new planting. Summer- bearing plants are usually left in the ground 2-3 years. The summer- bearing plants should be renewed annually after bearing by mowing the leaves off the plants and thinning them out as needed. Some new compost is placed on top of the mowed plants since crowns of the plants grow up in height and will need some new soil to develop new roots. Commercially, plants are normally grown in an area for 3-5 years, and then rotated out of that area for 5-7 years. This is to avoid problems with the build-up of soil pathogens. If homeowners manage soil well and provide plenty of organic matter, rotation times might be shortened or eliminated.

When harvesting from the home garden, berries should be fully red. This will assure top flavor. They can be stored at 33 F for as long as a couple of weeks, or for a bit shorter time at normal refrigerator temperatures. The important point is to chill the berries as soon as they are harvested so that they will have maximum shelf life. Berries may also be frozen by spacing them out on a tray, freezing them, and then placing them in freezer bags.

For more information about growing strawberries in the home garden, contact local your Master Gardener or county Cooperative Extension office.