

STRAWBERRY CULTURE

Strawberry production in home gardens is an interesting phenomenon. More people are happier with strawberry plants that produce less fruit than any other crop they grow. Why? If a tomato variety produced only one serving every two weeks -- which is common for the ever-bearing strawberry types -- gardeners would rapidly abandon it. Yet, I constantly encounter gardeners who criticize my renaming of the "ever-bearing" strawberry to "never-bearing strawberry." You should consider the effort of watering, insect, disease and weed control involved, and the potential yield of the "ever-bearing" strawberries before wasting valuable time and space on strawberry growing. Varieties for South Central Texas to look for at your local independent nursery include: Chandler, Sequoia, Douglas, Elan, Seascape, Pajaro, Quinault, Cardinal and Allstar. The most widely found and used in Poteet commercial plantings are the first three.

Yet, after all is said and done, gardeners still want to grow strawberries! Why? The strawberry is the first fruit ready to harvest in the spring and, most important, they are good to eat. Strawberries can be grown in this area if the right things are done at the right time with the right varieties.

The right time to plant strawberries for the largest plants and crop in South Central Texas is September through December 15th..... NOT in the spring or after the Poteet Strawberry Festival in April. Gardeners who procrastinate until late March greatly reduce yield potential. Poteet strawberry producers use an 8-month system -- plant in September, harvest in April and destroy the plants in June. This system differs from the conventional strawberry production system used by our northern neighbors who plant in February and enjoying the best harvest 14 months later in April or May. Again, that term "efficiency" pops up. Which is more efficient, the 8-month or the 14-month system? Especially when yields are the same.



None of the strawberry varieties which you see in mail order catalogs will perform as well as the plants which are sold in local nurseries in September. Just be sure to remove all blooms and runners that are produced in the fall until Christmas so that strong "Mother" plant growth is encouraged.

Now you know the right time and the right plants to use. The most difficult task is yet to come -- doing the right things to insure adequate yields. Gardeners will always successfully produce strawberries if they keep one basic fact in mind. Strawberry plants detest, abhor and generally don't enjoy growing in the material located in the backyard which is loosely termed "soil". Strawberries are commercially produced in sandy soil and while they will grow in our soil, that doesn't mean that it will necessarily be producing efficiently. Strawberry plants thrive in acid soils -- ours is alkaline. Strawberry plants yield more, and sweeter berries, when growing in sandy soils -- ours is clay. Strawberry plants enjoy soils high in organic matter -- ours is extremely deficient.

Sound bad? The situation may seem hopeless, but for the die-hard gardener, NOTHING is impossible. For you stubborn, do- or-die-trying gardeners, start digging! You need to excavate the bad soil and replace it with the good. "Good" strawberry soil means sandy. Washed sand or Poteet red sand can be purchased from local sand-and-gravel companies (check the yellow pages in the telephone book). Specially formulated mixtures can also be purchased from commercial formulators. If digging is not your pleasure, a raised bed filled with sand will do the trick. Be sure to locate your bed where the plants will get sun all day, or at least for 8 hours.

Plants should be spaced 12 inches apart for maximum yields. If you already have an established strawberry bed, now is the time of year to thin plants until they are twelve inches apart to insure production of large berries next spring.

If "land-moving" does not suit your fancy either, a simple answer is to grow strawberries in containers. Whiskey barrels, hanging baskets or any well-draining container filled with potting mix -- not garden soil -- will produce an abundance of strawberries.

The difference is the yield per plant caused by optimum growing conditions. A container that drains well, filled with a potting mix, offers the ideal situation for berry production. Potting mixes like Jungle Growth are acidic in nature and drain well. This ideal growing condition may cause strawberry plants to yield as much as a pint of berries per plant. I have produced more strawberries from plants growing on one hanging basket than I have from plants growing in a 100-square foot area where there is alkaline soil!

Of course, the larger the container, the more plants can be planted and, subsequently, more berries will be produced. At this point, forget about prohibition and tee totaling, and use a whiskey barrel. One gardener told me that emptying a whiskey barrel is one aspect of gardening where he has no problem soliciting participation! Once the ceremony of barrel emptying is complete, the person who can still hold a drill steady should drill 2- inch diameter holes in the sides of the barrel. Space the holes 10 to 12 inches apart around the barrel, and make sure that holes are offset (not directly above one another) between rows. Drill smaller holes in the bottom of the barrel to insure adequate drainage.

Once the barrel is drilled, it is planting time. Barrels cut into halves are easiest to handle and get the best growing results. Whole barrels sometimes do not drain properly, and plants in lower holes die. A center core of a porous material surrounded by a well-drained potting mix will insure success. I find that a wire mesh of hardware cloth formed into a 10 to 12 inch circle, placed in the center of the barrel and filled with Perlite or coarse bark will insure proper watering of lower plants.

As the potting mix is poured into the barrel and firmed, strawberry transplants are planted in the drilled side holes from the inside of the barrel.

Lack of continuous fertilization for container-grown fruits and vegetables is one mistake that most gardeners make. To insure adequate fertilization, add 6 each 12 gram Agriform Slow Release Fertilizer pellets to each 10" layer of the strawberry barrel. Also, feed container plants with a soluble fertilizer (30-10-10) every 7 to 10 days. Most potting mixes contain no fertilizer elements. Organic Espoma vegetable plant food can be exchanged for Agriform and Medina Hasta-Gro for the water soluble fertilizer at the same frequency for the organic route. Regular watering wash out nutrient elements that must be replenished if plants are expected to grow vigorously.



Four heavy-duty coasters can be attached directly to the bottom of the barrel so that it can be rotated to so that all plants will receive adequate sunlight, insuring uniform plant growth. Don't worry about protecting plants during the winter because they won't freeze!

The only insect threat that you will have to contend with are spider mites, controlled by using Neem oil, then Pyrethrin or sulfur, and pill bugs (sow bugs), controlled by using bug baits, 2 bricks or a heavy foot! Spinosad2 and Pyrethrin if going organic. Foliage diseases can be controlled by using a foliar fungicide that contains Daconil or copper containing fungicides while organic. So as you see, strawberry production is simple.

Transplant strawberry plants now into a sunny location that has sandy, low pH, high organic soil. Remove all of the blooms and runners that are formed between now and Christmas, and prepare for an abundant harvest of luscious berries in April. It's as simple as criticizing your in-laws and having them enjoy it! Some of the "ole"-timers are wondering if I have gone completely bananas encouraging gardeners to go to such trouble to produce strawberries. Many have transplanted the plants in regular soil and harvested strawberries every year. That's probably true, but the real question is how many strawberries are harvested. Each, and I repeat, EACH strawberry plant should yield AT least one or two pints per plant! By: Jerry Parsons Updated: George L. Gentry

