



Strawberries

Surely one of the highlights for any gardener is eating berries you have grown and nurtured yourself. Not only do they taste sweeter when they're home-grown, they are one of the easiest fruiting plants for children to grow and enjoy. Strawberries are ground-hugging, herbaceous plants, about 15cm high and spreading into a clump 50–100cm wide. Part of the large Rosaceae family, their flowers are simple, five-petalled blooms that are pollinated by bees. These white or occasionally pink flowers are followed by succulent red fruits. Each clump sends out long thin runners (or stems) that take root to form a new plant.

Getting started

Buy virus-free stock from nurseries, as strawberries are prone to disease. About 20–30 plants provide enough fruit for a family, but even a couple of plants can be a delight to grow.

Prior to planting, dig over the soil to remove weeds and any large clods, and add in plenty of compost, animal manure or blood and bone.

Position your plants about 30cm apart, in full sun. Strawberries do best in well-drained soil, so plant them into soil that has been mounded up slightly. The crown of the plant, which is the swollen stem base, must be left at the surface of the soil and not buried too deep.

Care and maintenance

Water well, especially when the young plants are establishing, and during dry summers.

Surround each plant with a layer of straw mulch so the fruit does not spoil by touching the soil.

To feed sprinkle a small handful of complete organic fertiliser (which is high in potash) around each plant as it comes into first flower, and water well.

Harvesting

For the fullest flavour from home-grown fruit, pick the berries at the right degree of ripeness. They are at their best when each fruit is three-quarters red.

To avoid bruising ripe fruit, harvest it using scissors and leave a small piece of stalk attached.

Pruning

Over summer, strawberry plants send out runners. These modified shoots can be used to propagate new plants but if you don't need new plants, cut these runners off. After fruiting has finished, tidy up the bushes by giving them a hard prune down to 10cm. After four years, plants become underproductive. Remove old plants and replant with new virus-free stock.

Troubleshooting

Strawberries are very desirable to creatures other than humans. Repel snails and slugs with pet-safe baits or squashing.

The disease botrytis, or grey mould, can affect strawberry fruit and leaves. Remove brown or soggy fruit. Powdery mildew, a fungus that causes a whitish-grey powder on the leaves, can also affect strawberries. Full sun and good air circulation reduces powdery mildew.

Consult your nursery garden centre for advice.

Life's a garden – dig it!