

# Strawberries

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Strawberries are an amazingly hardy crop. All the plants in our beds have survived two of the coldest winters we've had and have produced great quantities of fruit.

During 2010 we froze approximately 30lbs of our Cambridge variety, made 12 jars of jam, froze a strawberry and rhubarb crumble and made two cheesecakes, as well as nibbled at them whenever we fancied.



So what would it help to know about them?

## **Preparation & Care**

Strawberries are a woodland plant, which means that they tolerate shade, although they fruit better in sun. They like plenty of humus (in the wild they grow in pure leaf mould) and they don't object to fairly acid conditions.

They prefer a light soil to clay, but will thrive in any well-drained ground provided they have plenty of humus. They develop a much better flavour in a cold climate, and new plants should be moved to totally fresh ground every three years as they are a hungry plant that tends to exhaust the soil.

When the soil is being prepared, it should be dug one spade deep and plenty of compost or well-rotted organic manure incorporated. Strawberries like lots of potash too.

Weeds should be removed regularly using a hoe or by hand. Once the crop starts to spread, straw can be placed under the straggling stems to keep them clean.

## **Propagation**

Virus-free strawberry plants can be purchased from reputable suppliers. Once planted, most varieties will make runners that root themselves. These can be encouraged by removing the blossom from a few plants. Small pots can be buried in the soil in the ground near the parent plants and the ends of the runners pegged on to the pots. When they've rooted properly, they can be severed from their parent plant, the pots dug up and the new plants transplanted. Parent plants can put out several runners, so choose two or three of the strongest and remove the weaker ones.

In this way a new strawberry bed could be established every autumn giving a freshly planted bed, a year old bed, a two year old bed and a three year old bed – the last of which will be ready for digging up once it's cropped. The new beds should be dug as far as possible from the old ones to hinder disease.





The bed shown on the right was made up entirely of runners from another bed.

Strawberries can be planted at any time of the year but it's traditional to plant them late in the summer so they can be harvested the following year.

They should be planted so that the crown is at ground level but the roots are spread out widely and downwards and watered well. They can be placed 38cm (15in) apart with 75cm (30in) between rows.

To help warm up the soil and to prevent weeds from taking hold, plastic or weed control membrane can be placed over the soil prepared for the strawberry beds, holes made in it at the recommended distances (see above) and the strawberries planted in them. Straw can then be placed on top of that to keep the fruit dry.

### **Pests & Diseases**

Birds love to eat the ripe berries but the plants can be protected by covering with a net.

Powdery Mildew will make them a dull brown colour, so remove any infected fruit as soon as you spot it.

Keep an eye out for aphids as they are a menace because they spread virus diseases.

Strawberry Beetle can be discouraged by keeping the beds weeded.

Rot can be a problem after rain. All ripe berries should be picked immediately after rain and rotten ones composted.

### **Harvesting & Storage**

The fruit should be pulled off the plant with their stems intact, and the stems left on right up until eating otherwise vitamins and other nutrients are lost. They can be stored in the shade for a few hours, in the fridge for a day or two. They can be frozen but tend to go soft when thawed.



### **After Care**

The straw should be removed once the crop has been harvested and the bed cleared of dead leaves, surplus runners and weeds.