Grow Your Own Organic Strawberries

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Mid October is prime time to set out strawberry plants in our area. They make vigorous plants and strong fruiting crowns during the coolest months of our climate. Then, in early April of next spring, you will begin picking fully ripe, fresh, homegrown fruit which continues to ripen into late June.

Just 50 plants and a small area which accommodates a 3' x 25' bed are enough to get a family of four started. Make sure the site has full sunlight, is near a water source, is free of nematodes, and can be dug a few weeks in advance to remove or turn weeds under. The double dig method gives a superior, long lasting bed. If needed, about 5-10 pounds of lime should be put down and raked in, also, at this time. Prior to planting, broadcast 15 pounds of an appropriate vegetable meal or animal based fertilizer, and rake it into the surface of the soil as you do a final leveling of the bed. If compost is available add a one inch layer prior to leveling. The finished bed should be 4-6 inches high and 30 inches wide at the top. Make the bed rounded with the center of the bed slightly higher than the edges.

To locate your holes for setting the plants, set a retractable tape measure at 25' and place it 9 inches in from one edge of the bed and mark the soil every 12 inches. Move the ruler over 12 inches and mark your second row of holes every 12 inches. If you desire to grow your own transplants for use one year from now, refer to ‘Home Propagation of Organic Strawberry Plants’ for an alternative planting plan. Dig small, 4" deep holes (in pre-wetted soil if dry) and set each plant at the mid point of the crown when firming it in. Avoid planting too deep or too shallow. Trim away dead leaves and stolons as well as excess green leaves. Keep only one to two center leaves, depending on the amount and condition of the roots.

Lay a slow seep drip hose down the center of the bed and immediately begin to soak the bed for the next hour. Water 3 times a week for the first 2 weeks followed by once a week or less from November through mid February depending on rainfall. At that time, in February, remove weeds and apply 2" of hay or straw mulch. As the weather warms up, resume watering 2 to 3 times per week mid February through June.

During the month of March be prepared to frost protect blooms and fruit by covering the bed with floating row cover or heavy clear plastic film, about mid-afternoon prior to each night of frost. Uncover by mid morning the next day. Also, be prepared to protect fruit from bird damage during harvest time by covering with a ½ inch mesh polynetting. During the harvest season, practice good sanitation by removing and disposing of all spoiled fruit as well as diseased and dead leaves. This is the best protection against fruit rots. Under conditions of heavy soils, excessive rain, or over watering, fruit diseases, especially leather rot, can cause heavy fruit losses. A 2 inch mulch of rice hulls or finely shredded hay should be placed between the fruit
and the soil in late March. Also, make **only deep waterings twice a week**, before mid afternoon.

A well tested and easy to use **organic mulch** consists of applying a **single layer of newspaper**, and laying on top 2 to 3" of shredded hay or straw. This may be laid around the plants the same day they are set or at any time prior to late March. This mulch serves to hold moisture, provides a barrier to weeds, and maintains a **dry barrier between fruit and soil** which lowers fruit rot. Rainfall will easily pass through this mulch. To maintain a 18", weed free aisle around the bed lay down a six-ply thickness of newspapers and four inches of hay or old pine straw. If applied at planting time, this should maintain a good weed barrier for the season.

Our **varieties** of choice continue to be **Camarosa** and **Chandler**. The combination of excellent yields, large berry size and good taste far surpasses that of any traditional varieties with which we've compared them. On a per plant or per square foot basis, **Camarosa yields** as much as **2.2 pints**, while **Chandler produces 2 pints** per plant for a 9 month season. For a family size bed of **50 plants**, this translates to **100 pints** of high quality **fruit**, valued conservatively at **$200.00**.

We encourage you to use as many organic methods as possible including **double digging** your bed, applying **compost** and **organic fertilizers**, and using **organic pest control** measures. These trials are ongoing at the Boggs Organic Garden in Burke County. Ask us for more information on these health promoting, natural practices.