FIRST THINGS FIRST. Your plants may arrive dry and thirsty. Give them a drink, watering until the pot turns dark brown. Keep plants in a bright spot protected from cold, and plant after the last frost. Follow planting directions on the pot label or see the video at bonnieplants.com/growing/growing-strawberries.

STRAWBERRIES

GETTING STARTED
Savoring the melt-in-your-mouth juiciness of freshly picked strawberries is but one reason to grow your own. The first fruits to ripen in spring, strawberries are nutritious assets to any garden. The sturdy little plants prosper when planted in properly prepared beds or rows, or you can put them to work as edible edgings or let them sprawl over the top of a wall. Strawberries are happy to grow in strawberry jars and hanging baskets, too.

Like most hardy perennials, strawberries die back in winter and start growing vigorously as the soil warms in spring. After bearing fruit, many varieties produce runners with baby plants at the tips. Your strawberries will produce more fruit if you clip off most of the runners. Strawberries typically take a rest during summer’s second half. When kept weeded and lightly watered, most plants perk up and grow again for a while in the fall.

From zone 6 northward, strawberries are best planted in spring so they will be well-rooted by the following winter. Containers can be replanted in late summer and moved to a cool, protected place (such as an unheated garage) during the coldest months. From zone 7 southward, strawberries can be planted in fall. (In warm, humid coastal areas, many are grown as cool weather annuals.) Once a planting is established, simply lift your healthiest plants each September and replant them in a freshly renovated site.

PLANTING
Strawberries grow best in a well-drained spot with at least 8 hours of full sun. Follow these guidelines when planting:

Prepare the soil. Strawberries prefer slightly acidic soil with a pH between 5.5 and 6.8. If soils in your area are naturally alkaline, it is best to grow strawberries in containers filled with potting soil. Strawberries may also sulk in heavy clay, which should be generously amended before planting with 4 or more inches of composted leaves (or other bulky organic matter), then raked into raised mounds to improve drainage. If soil is sandy, mix in a 1-inch layer of rich compost.

Plant right. Be sure to set the plants so that their roots are well covered with soil but the central growing bud, or crown, is exposed to light and fresh air. This is very important: If you bury the crown, the plant could easily rot. Follow spacing guidelines found on the plant’s stick tag. After planting, water well and add mulch. Any type of mulch—from black plastic to pine straw to shredded leaves—will help keep the soil moist and the plants clean.

Watch for blossoms. Look for your plants to begin blooming in early spring. Flowers must be visited by bees and other pollinating insects before they can set fruit. In warm, sunny weather, most berries ripen about 30 days after blossoms are fertilized.

FERTILIZING
Feed at planting with Bonnie Herb, Vegetable & Flower Plant Food to give strawberries a healthy boost. They will love the naturally based formula made from oilseed extract. Follow label directions—don’t overdo it. Continue to apply every 1 to 2 weeks.
WHEN WILL PLANTS PRODUCE?

JUNE-BEARING VARIETIES such as Allstar bear all at once, usually over a period of about 3 weeks. Although called June-bearing, these bear earlier than June in warm climates.

EVERBEARING VARIETIES like Quinault produce a big crop from spring flowers, set light flushes of fruit through the summer, and then bloom and bear again in late summer and fall.

PROTECTION FROM BIRDS

The most effective technique for protecting strawberries from birds is to drape the strawberry patch with bird netting, an inexpensive plastic mesh with ¼-inch holes. Supported on a frame made from wood or PVC pipes (as you would a floating row cover), or held above the plants by stakes topped with upside-down flower pots, the netting will keep birds from reaching the berries. Bird netting can be purchased at garden centers or online.

Netting works well for berries growing in pots, too. Put several short stakes inside the pot, or use a small tomato cage. Drape netting over the top, allowing it to come all the way down to the ground; leave enough room around the edges that the birds can’t reach the berries. Then use landscape pins to secure the bottom. Be sure to re-secure the netting each time you pick.

RECIPES

From salad to dessert (or straight from the vine!), there are so many delicious ways to eat sun-ripened strawberries. Visit bonnieplants.com/cooking for strawberry recipes you’ll want to make again and again.

TROUBLESHOOTING

Slugs often chew holes in strawberries just as they begin to ripen. Organic mulches such as straw encourage slugs, so where slugs are a problem, use plastic mulch instead. In summer, several fungal diseases can cause dark spots to form on leaves. Try clipping or mowing strawberry foliage and raking it away; this can interrupt the life cycles of some strawberry pests and diseases. By far the worst pests of strawberries, though, are birds. To keep them from stealing your berries, cover your plants with lightweight bird netting once the berries begin to ripen. (See sidebar for more information.)

Sometimes fruit may be small because of heat and drought. Make sure to give plants enough water, and when the weather improves, the new fruit should be of normal size. Weather may also be to blame for deformed berries. Bees tend to stay in their hives during rain and cool temperatures, which can hinder pollination.

HARVEST & USE

Harvest strawberries when they turn red. Avoid leaving ripe berries on the vine, as they will rot quickly. Pick berries in the morning, when the fruits are cool and plump, and immediately put them in the refrigerator. Wait until just before you eat or cook them to rinse the berries thoroughly with cool water. Wet berries spoil rapidly, even in the refrigerator. Extra strawberries can be frozen, dried, or made into jam or preserves.

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