

DIRTY FINGERNAILS AND ALL

Munching and mulching strawberries

BY SIOUX ROGERS

How did strawberries get their name? According to almanac.com, "One theory is that woodland pickers strung them on pieces of straw to carry them to market. Others believe that the surface of the fruit looks as if it's embedded with bits of straw. Still others think that the name comes from the Old English word meaning 'to strew,' because the plant's runners stray in all directions and look as if they are strewn on the ground."

There are four basic types of strawberries for the home gardener: June bearing, everbearing/day-neutral, alpine, and musk.

June-bearing strawberries produce a very fast but short crop, ripening in late spring to early summer. The harvest is short-lived; the flavor is superb.

June-bearings are easily explained, but when it comes to everbearings/day-neutrals, things get rather confusing. So stay with me and see if you can make heads or tails of the distinction between day-neutral and everbearing strawberries. According to one reputable source, "all day-neutral strawberries are everbearing, but not all everbearing strawberries are day-neutral. The distinction between everbearing and day-neutral strawberries is blurred" (homeguides.sfgate.com/difference-between-everbearing-dayneutral-strawberries-43384.html). In order to produce *more* strawberries, the wonders of modern science developed the day-neutral strawberry from everbearing strawberry plants. This modern-day strawberry will produce a high yield of fruit continuously all summer and into the fall if the temperature remains between 35 and 85 degrees Fahrenheit.

Alpine strawberries are very small, but have the essence of strawberry flavor. Alpine varieties can be red, yellow, or white. I have planted these before; they are extremely prolific with runners, but are very small and difficult to pick because it is hard to tell when a white or yellow strawberry is ripe. The upside is that these are an amazing and

worthwhile delicacy, guaranteed to drive your taste buds to ecstasy.

I am not familiar with musk strawberries, but here's a description from *Mother Earth News*: "Musk strawberries produce small fruits with a pungent aroma and complex flavor. Berries tend to be precious and few; improve fruit by adding male plants every couple of years. Musk strawberries are too rowdy for containers" (motherearthnews.com/organic/).

Left alone, alpine or musk strawberry plants will become a lush ground cover with small amounts of edible fruit.

Having said all this, I honestly never pay attention to these categories. When I want a special variety of a strawberry based on a specific characteristic, I order some from a catalog. Otherwise, I *never* buy strawberry plants—friends who grow them usually are anxious to give away the runners, something akin to getting rid of zucchini.

Strawberries are so easy to plant and grow—perhaps that is why they are a backyard favorite. Strawberries can be planted in just about anything you

can think of, e.g., rain gutters, strawberry pyramids, old tires, hanging baskets, large-diameter PVC pipes, old rain boots, old tubs, you name it.

If you are buying bare-root strawberries, try for hardy disease-resistant varieties like Benton, Hood or Puget Sound. When planting, spread out the strawberry roots without bending them. The hole needs only to be deep enough to cover the roots, with the crown portion above the soil, not buried. Strawberries sprawl and, in no time at all, will be fraternizing with all your other plants; give them adequate space. Space rows four feet apart and plants 20 inches from each other.

When plants are growing, make sure they get enough water to keep their shallow roots from getting thirsty. Keep the beds heavily mulched with pine needles, wood chips, straw, black

plastic, or old leaves (never use walnut leaves). By using organic material to mulch, you are encouraging microscopic microbial activity in the soil and retaining moisture and nutrients. Those are very good things.

Here is the sad part. In order to have a bountiful crop of strawberries next year, you should clip off as many of the blossoms from the first-year plants as you can emotionally handle. Since I am a wimp, I clip just half of the blossoms, and I will still have a great crop next year. Lordy, Lordy, don't forget to also pick off the runners.

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Photo, right: Strawberries planted in pockets (chefjessicabright.com).

Photo, below left: Space your strawberries carefully (sunnysidelocal.com/growing-resources/strawberry-plants-2/).

Photo, below right: Little alpine strawberries (vegetablegardendjp.blogspot.com/2010/06/apple-bagging-with-footies.html).



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