STRAWBERRIES

Wouldn't it be nice to have fresh strawberries straight from your garden? Strawberries can be grown in home gardens throughout the state of Florida and October is the month to begin planting them. They can either be planted in the ground or in containers. Since strawberries are sensitive to climatic conditions, it is important to select a variety of strawberry that is adapted to the Florida climate.

The Florida 90 is an older variety of strawberry that produces a large plant. This plant grows vigorously and yields heavily over a long period of time. It produces large, red, pointed berries that have a good eating quality.

Tioga is another strawberry variety that has a very large and vigorous growth habit. It has large, dark green leaves. The berries are also very large. They are firm and wedge-shaped. They are only of medium quality and the plant is susceptible to the leaf-spot disease.

The sequoia variety of strawberry is a large plant. The fruit is big, wedge-shaped, and of high quality. When ripe, the fruit is somewhat soft.

A good variety for Florida home gardeners is the Florida Belle. This variety produces an upright plant, is resistant to a number of diseases, and yields a large number of fruit. The berries are conical and red, with an occasional white shoulder.

Other Florida varieties include Dover, Tufts, Douglas, Oso Grande, Chandler, Selva, and Sweet Charlie. All the varieties mentioned bear fruit early and continuously for 3 or more months. The "Everbearing" varieties of strawberries are not suited for Florida and should not be planted.

Strawberries can be grown in a wide variety of soil-types, but prefer well-drained, moist, sandy soils that contain a good quantity of organic matter. Before planting, broadcast a 6-8-8 fertilizer throughout the plot and mix it thoroughly into the soil. Then make a bed 6" - 8" inches high and 24" wide. A furrow, 6" deep, should next be prepared in the center of the bed. Apply additional fertilizer in the furrow and cover with soil. Make sure not to place the fertilizer directly on the plant roots, as salt burn may occur.

To achieve the best results with your strawberries, the plants should be mulched. Straw and other organic materials can be used, however, black polyethylene plastic mulch has proven to be the best. Use a 1½ millimeter thick plastic that is wide enough to cover the top and sides of the bed. Apply the mulch just before planting; making sure the bed is firm and watered well before doing so.

It is important to keep the roots of the plants moist and free from injury before planting. If you receive the plants before you are ready to plant them, make sure they are well wrapped and placed in the refrigerator for a few days. You should also be sure that you buy only certified, disease-free plants in order to reduce future problems.

Before placing the strawberry plants in the bed, carefully spread the roots out in a fan-shape, without damaging the crumpling them. Set them in the bed at the correct depth. Do not cover the crown of the plant or leave roots exposed. Pack the soil firmly around the roots and sprinkle with water from overhead. Overhead sprinkling is beneficial for the plants because it keeps their tops from drying out while the roots are getting established.

After the strawberries are first set in the garden in the fall, they will produce vegetative growth. The cool nights and short days of the winter will stimulate the plants to produce flowers. Fruit will be ready for harvest in the late winter or early spring. The plants will continue to bear fruit until the onset of warmer weather.
For more information on strawberries or other plant related topics contact the Osceola County Extension Service. Master Gardeners are available to take your phone calls Monday to Friday from 10am to 2pm, at (321) 697-3000.

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