

Strawberries A Good Choice For Home Gardens

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

When it comes to fruit production, Kansas weather is fickle. Early warm ups and late freezes combine to take their toll in eliminating fruit production on many tree fruits. But strawberries seem to be well suited to our fickle climate and can usually be counted on to produce consistent crops if they are properly managed and well cared for.

Strawberry beds will take one full year to become established, but after that first year, you should expect excellent fruit yields. There are two types of strawberries; June-bearing and everbearing. June-bearing varieties produce one crop per year, usually from mid-May to mid-June. Everbearing produce one crop during the normal season and then a second crop during late summer or early fall. June-bearing varieties are somewhat easier to manage and produce better crops, in my opinion. Because of our often hot summers, the second crop of everbearing varieties may have poor fruit quality.

It is best to select a site that is slightly higher than surrounding areas as cold air will settle into low spots increasing the risk of late spring frost damage. The location should receive full sun and be well drained. Poor drainage in clay soils can be a problem so add organic matter to heavy clay soils during bed preparation or have slightly raised planting ridges. If the area is in sod it is best to work the soil a year in advance and keep it weed free to give the sod a chance to break down. This is also a good time to add organic matter.

Strawberries are best planted from mid-March to early April. Planting early gives them a chance to get well established before hot summer temperatures arrive. Soil preparation can begin just as soon as the soil is dry enough to work without causing a muddy mess! It's a good idea to do a soil test also. Strawberries are going to grow best with a slightly acid soil preferring a pH between 5.8 and 6.5. You may have to add sulfur to your strawberry bed prior to planting to lower the pH. Fertility is important and we recommend adding 1 to 1 1/4 pounds per 100 square feet of a balanced garden fertilizer like 10-10-10 or similar prior to planting.

If you are planting a small strawberry bed, then container grown plants are a good option. But for larger plantings, buy dormant plants that have been kept moist and cool. Strawberries are normally planted in rows about 48 inches apart with the plants being planted 18 to 24 inches apart within the row. You want to give lots of room for the plants to develop runners and daughter plants. The daughter plants produced this year will provide the fruit production next year. To ensure good plant development remove blossoms from the plants the spring that they are set out. Also pay close attention making sure that the plants are set with leaves, stems and buds above the ground and crowns at the soil surface.

I prefer to plant at least two different maturity varieties in beds to spread out the crop and reduce frost risk. Some good June-bearing varieties of differing maturities include Earliglow, Red Chief and Jewel. Only two everbearing varieties are recommended for Kansas; Tribute and Tristar. Weed control is essential for successful strawberry beds as is keeping it well watered in July and August.

We have an excellent bulletin on strawberries available at the Extension Office for no charge. The bulletin can also be found on line at: <http://tinyurl.com/9wob87w>