Homegrown strawberries make a sweet, tasty summer treat

Now that this part of the country has gotten above the sub-zero temperatures, early spring gardening activities soon will kick into action. While this area isn’t known for producing pineapples or oranges, gardeners can produce tasty strawberries.

One of the great things about growing strawberries is gardeners don’t have to have an expansive garden space to do so. While they often are planted in traditional beds, they’re easy to grow in raised beds or as patio plants. They also are great for gardeners who like to experiment with vertical gardening.

Whatever planting method gardeners choose, make sure to choose a site with ample sunlight, as well as well-drained soil. Raised beds or in mounded rows improve soil drainage. Mix compost into the soil to add organic matter. As the beds are prepared, try to limit the width to around 3 feet to 4 feet so you can easily reach in to harvest the berries. When planting multiple rows, leave about 4 feet between each row with about 18 inches to 24 inches between plants.

Planting depth is important for strawberries. Set the plants so the crown is level with the soil surface. Spread the roots out as you plant. If you’re dealing with long roots, they can be trimmed back. Once planted, irrigate with about 1 inch of water per week. Adding mulch around each plant will help conserve moisture, as well as cut down on weeds. Strawberries are an irresistible snack for slugs and snails and the mulch will help with this pest issue.

In general, it’s advised to remove flowers the first year to direct energy to the development of a strong root systems. Begin harvesting your fruit the second year. At this time, it’s important to give your strawberry plants a good feed with a liquid fertilizer once flowers start to appear. This will help ensure the production of large, tasty fruits.

Because strawberries have several diseases in common with other berry plants, as well as crops such tomatoes, potatoes and peppers, make sure the site for the strawberry plants hasn’t been used for any of these crops for several years.

Another great thing about strawberries is they’re easy to propagate. The plants send out new runners all summer, which can be snipped and planted into a gritty compost mix. These plants are an exact clone of the parent plant.

So, how long will it take before gardeners can slice those just-picked strawberries over a bowl of homemade ice cream? From seed transplants to fruit takes about three months, on average, depending on variety and growing conditions. Keep in mind there are differences among the
varieties. Honeoye and Allstar are a couple of popular varieties for early cropping. Remember, if it crops early, the season ends early. You can extend the growing season by planting the early crop varieties along with a longer-producing plant such as Everbearing. This variety produces berries from May to mid-June, and again in the fall.

Once vigorous plants may begin to slow down production or start producing smaller fruit – usually after about three years. This means it’s time to retire those plants and get new ones in the soil.

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