

GROWING ALPINE STRAWBERRIES

Home-grown strawberries are vastly superior in flavor to commercially-produced ones, but many home gardeners don't have the space or time to grow them. Fortunately, Alpine strawberries (*Fragaria vesca*) require much less space and effort, and reward the gardener with small but intensely fragrant and flavorful fruit. They are easy to grow in containers or hanging baskets, and they can be grown from seed or transplants, both available by mail order or at local garden centers. The tidy, attractive plants will produce fruit from early summer through fall.

In addition to the familiar red fruit, some varieties produce yellow or white fruit. There are dozens of varieties available, and some of the best are Mignonette, with conical fruits of intense flavor up to an inch long; Alpine Yellow, or Rugen, a red variety.

Alpine strawberries are fleeting and should be used as soon as possible after harvest. A few minutes' work will yield a handful of the tiny berries; enough to top morning cereal or to decorate a cake or fruit platter. Clusters of berries on their long stems are also a nice addition to a flower arrangement. Keep the berries picked to encourage continued production.

Alpine strawberries do not put out runners, but they do spread readily from seed. They make an attractive ground cover or edging for a planting bed, and in mild winter areas like ours, they winter over with no extra protection from frost. After two or three years they should be divided to keep them producing.

The seeds of Alpine strawberries are tiny and should be sprinkled lightly onto the surface of a fine potting mix. Press the seeds lightly into the surface. Cover with a plastic bag and keep the potting mix moist but not soggy until the seeds have germinated. Transplant into containers or into the garden when the plants are large enough to handle. Plants grown from seed produce fruit the first year if planted early enough.

The cultural needs of Alpine strawberries are essentially the same as regular strawberries: fertile, well drained soil that is slightly acidic and free of weeds. Compost or well-composted manure can be worked into the soil and will provide most of the fertilizer the plants need. If growing in the ground, plant them about a foot apart on mounds or in raised beds. When planting, make sure the crown of the plant is at soil level to avoid crown rot (too low) and drying out the roots (too high).

Alpine strawberries are very well suited to container growing, and a large strawberry planter holding a dozen or more plants not only produces the sweet and fragrant fruit, but is a lovely addition to a sunny patio or balcony. In containers use a good quality potting mix (not soil).

The plants should be mulched with straw, pine needles, or other mulch to keep the soil cool, suppress weed seed germination, conserve water, and keep the fruit clean. The plants will thrive in sun or part shade, but in hotter areas should get some protection from hot afternoon sun.

When the plants begin to grow in the spring, feed them with a balanced, slow release fertilizer. When the top inch of soil is dry, water deeply to encourage strong root systems. Don't get the plants wet in the evening. Plants in containers, particularly unglazed clay pots, will require more frequent watering.

The main pests of Alpine strawberries are snails and slugs. Putting out traps or enclosing the container or raised bed with a strip of copper tape will keep snails and slugs out. If growing strawberries in the ground, use traps or an iron phosphate snail bait, but be careful to also use bird netting to keep birds from eating the bait. Birds and small animals love the fruit, so it might be necessary to enclose the plants in a chicken wire dome. Any aphids on the plants can be dislodged with a blast of water from the hose.