How to Grow Strawberries

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How to Grow Strawberries in the UK:

Strawberries were the first proper fruit I ever grew, back when I had no idea what I was doing, and they were forgiving enough to crop anyway. That is the thing about strawberries: they are one of the most rewarding fruits for a beginner because they give you results fast, they grow happily in pots, and a single plant can keep going for years and quietly produce a whole row of new plants for free. After twenty-odd years of growing them in Oxfordshire, I still think they are the best first fruit for anyone in the UK.

The question I get asked most is simply when to plant them, and the honest answer is that it depends on what sort of plants you are buying. Bare-root, potted, runners and seed all have different ideal timings, and getting this right is the difference between a plant that crops well next summer and one that struggles.

So this guide leads with the timing, then covers everything else: where to plant, growing in pots, feeding, and how to turn one plant into many.

When to Plant Strawberries in the UK

There are two main planting windows for strawberries in the UK, and which one you use depends on the type of plant. Get the timing right and the plants establish properly before they have to crop.

Late summer to early autumn (the best time)

Late August to early October is genuinely the best time to plant strawberries in the UK, and it is the window most experienced gardeners use. Plants put in during this period have time to establish a good root system before winter, then romp away in spring and give you a proper crop the following summer. If you plant potted or bare-root strawberries in early autumn, you get full-sized fruit the very next year.

This is the timing I use for nearly all my strawberry planting. An autumn-planted strawberry has months to settle in while the soil is still warm and damp, and it rewards you the following June and July. The same bare-root autumn logic applies to raspberry canes, which I cover in how to grow raspberries in the UK.

Early to mid spring (the second option)

March to April is the other window. Spring planting works perfectly well, but there is a catch worth knowing. Strawberries planted in spring often will not give you a full crop in their first summer, because the plant is putting its energy into establishing roots rather than fruiting. Many gardeners pinch off the first flush of flowers on spring-planted strawberries to let the plant build strength, which means little or no fruit the first year but a much stronger plant and a bigger crop the year after.

If you buy strawberry plants in spring (which is when garden centres are full of them), plant them then by all means, just manage your expectations about that first summer. the vegetable sowing calendar covers timing for everything else through the year.

Timing by plant type
Bare-root strawberries: Plant in early autumn (September to October) or early spring (March to April), while dormant. These are the cheapest way to buy and arrive looking like dead twigs with roots. Do not panic, they grow.
Potted strawberries: Can be planted almost any time from spring to early autumn, as long as you keep them watered. Most flexible option.
Runners: Plant in late summer to early autumn, once they have rooted from a parent plant. More on these below.
Cold-stored runners: A specialist option, planted in late spring (May to June) for a crop just 60 days later. Useful for an out-of-season crop.
From seed: Sow in late winter to early spring (February to April) indoors. Slow and only really worth it for alpine strawberries.

Choosing the Right Type of Strawberry

Summer-fruiting strawberries for the big June crop, everbearers for a steady trickle, and tiny intense alpines.

Before you plant, it helps to know there are different sorts of strawberry that fruit at different times. Mixing them is how you get strawberries for months rather than a single glut.

Summer-fruiting (June-bearers): The classic strawberry. One big concentrated crop in June and July. Best flavour and biggest berries. Varieties like Cambridge Favourite, Honeoye (early) and Hapil.
Everbearing (perpetual): Smaller crops spread from early summer right through to autumn. Less of a glut, more of a steady trickle. Varieties like Mara des Bois (superb flavour) and Flamenco.
Alpine strawberries: Tiny, intensely flavoured wild-type berries. Grow happily from seed, tolerate shade better than other types, and make lovely edging plants. Not for jam, but wonderful eaten warm off the plant.
My honest recommendation for a beginner: plant a few summer-fruiting plants for the main crop and a couple of everbearers to extend the season. That combination keeps you in strawberries from June to the first frosts. For the main crop, a heavy-cropping summer variety like Sweet Colossus does the job, and for the long tail of the season an everbearer such as Sweet Summer keeps producing into autumn. If you want to grow something the supermarkets cannot sell you, the white pineberry White Dream is a genuine novelty that tastes faintly of pineapple and stops visiting children in their tracks.

Where to Plant Strawberries
Sun and position
Full sun is what gives you sweet strawberries. Six or more hours of direct sun a day produces the best flavour and the heaviest crops. Strawberries will grow in part shade, but the fruit is smaller, later, and noticeably less sweet. A sunny, sheltered spot is ideal. The one exception is alpine strawberries, which cope with more shade than the big summer types.

Soil

Strawberries want fertile, free-draining soil that does not waterlog. They are not as fussy as Mediterranean herbs, but they hate sitting in cold wet ground over winter, which causes the crowns to rot. If you have heavy clay, work in plenty of organic matter before planting, or grow them in raised beds or pots instead. How to tell if your garden soil is clay, loam or sand covers the checks, and how to improve garden soil in the UK covers the work. On really heavy ground, improving drainage in clay soil is worth reading first.

Slightly acidic soil is ideal, but strawberries are tolerant and crop fine in most UK garden soil that has been improved with compost. Avoid planting where you have recently grown potatoes, tomatoes or other strawberries, as they can share soil-borne diseases.

Spacing

Plant with the crown sitting exactly at soil level, too deep and it rots, too shallow and the roots dry out.

Give each plant room. Space strawberry plants about 30 to 40cm apart, with 60 to 75cm between rows. They spread wider than people expect and crowded plants get less air, more disease, and smaller fruit. Plant with the crown (the central growing point) right at soil level. Plant it too deep and it rots, too shallow and the roots dry out. The crown sitting exactly at the surface is the sweet spot.

Growing Strawberries in Pots and Containers

Growing strawberries in pots and hanging baskets keeps the fruit off the ground and away from slugs.

Strawberries are one of the best fruits for containers, which is part of why they suit beginners and small gardens so well. A pot, a grow bag, a hanging basket, or a purpose-made strawberry planter all work brilliantly, and growing them off the ground has a real bonus: it keeps the fruit away from slugs.

Pots and compost

Use a pot at least 20cm across per plant, or space them 20 to 25cm apart in a larger trough. Hanging baskets are great for everbearers, which trail attractively over the edge. Fill with a good peat-free multipurpose compost. Peat-free compost in the UK and the best compost for vegetables both cover what to buy. Growing vegetables in pots in the UK and the best vegetables to grow in pots cover the wider container basics, and strawberries are firmly on that list.

Watering container strawberries

Pots dry out fast, and strawberries in containers need regular watering, especially once they are flowering and fruiting. Check daily in warm weather. Water at the base, not over the fruit and leaves, to reduce the risk of rot and mould. How often to water plants in the UK covers the principle. In a heatwave, container strawberries may need watering morning and evening. Protecting garden plants during heatwaves covers the wider summer care.

Feeding Strawberries for a Better Crop

Strawberries are hungry plants when they are fruiting, and feeding them properly makes a real difference to the size and sweetness of the crop. The key is to feed with the right thing at the right time.

From when the flowers appear in spring until the end of fruiting, feed every two weeks with a high-potassium liquid feed. Tomato feed is perfect and what most gardeners use, since the same high-potash mix that fattens tomatoes also sweetens strawberries. Avoid high-nitrogen feeds during fruiting, as they push leafy growth at the expense of fruit.

Taut netting over ripening fruit is the only reliable way to stop blackbirds stripping the crop.

The frustrating truth about strawberries is that everything wants to eat them as much as you do. Three things threaten the crop, and all are manageable.

Slugs. They love ripe strawberries and will hollow them out overnight. Growing in pots and hanging baskets keeps fruit off the ground and away from them. For ground-grown plants, tuck straw under the fruit to lift it clear, and see how to get rid of slugs in the garden for the full approach.
Birds. Blackbirds in particular will strip a strawberry patch. Netting over the plants as the fruit ripens is the only reliable answer. Make sure netting is taut so birds do not get tangled.

Grey mould (botrytis). Rotting fruit in damp weather. Improve airflow with proper spacing, water at the base not over the fruit, and pick off any mouldy berries promptly before it spreads. Tucking straw under the developing fruit is the traditional trick that gives strawberries their name, and it does three jobs at once: keeps the fruit clean, lifts it away from slugs, and suppresses weeds.

Growing Strawberries from Runners (Free Plants)

Peg a runner plantlet into a pot of compost and it roots into a free new plant within weeks.

Here is the genuinely satisfying part. Strawberry plants send out long stems called runners through summer, each of which produces a baby plant at the end. Left alone, these root themselves into the soil and become new plants. This is how one strawberry plant becomes a whole bed for nothing.

To make new plants deliberately, peg down the little plantlet at the end of a runner into a pot of compost sunk into the ground next to the parent, using a bent piece of wire or a stone. Keep it watered. Once it has rooted properly (usually 4 to 6 weeks, through late summer), snip the runner connecting it to the parent and you have a new independent plant ready to move in early autumn.

One important note on this: strawberry plants are most productive in their first three years, then crop declines. The runner system is nature's way of keeping you supplied. Take a few new runners each summer, plant them up, and rotate out the tired old plants every three years or so. Done this way, you never need to buy strawberry plants again after the first year. If you want maximum fruit from a young plant, though, snip off its runners as they appear so the plant puts energy into berries rather than babies. You cannot have both at once from the same plant.

Growing Strawberries from Seed
Most strawberries are not grown from seed, and for the big summer varieties I would not bother. Seed is slow, germination is erratic, and named varieties do not come true from seed. Buy plants or take runners instead.

The exception is alpine strawberries, which grow readily from seed and are genuinely worth it. Sow in late winter or early spring (February to April) on the surface of moist seed compost, as they need light to germinate, and keep warm. They are slow to start but make charming, productive little plants that crop in their first year and self-seed happily around the garden afterwards. How to harden off plants in the UK covers moving seed-raised plants outside safely.

Strawberry Care Through the Year
Late winter (February). Tidy up plants, remove dead leaves, apply a balanced feed or compost mulch as growth begins.

Spring (March to May). Plants put on growth and flower. Start high-potassium feeding when flowers appear. Protect blossom from late frosts with fleece if a cold snap threatens, as frost kills the flowers and there is no fruit without them. Frost damage on plants in the UK covers protection.

Early summer (June to July). Main cropping for summer-fruiting types. Net against birds, tuck straw under fruit, keep well watered and fed, pick regularly.

Late summer (August). After fruiting, cut off the old leaves of summer-fruiting plants to about 10cm above the crown, clear away straw and debris, and let fresh growth come through. Peg down runners for new plants now. Everbearers keep cropping into autumn.

Autumn (September to October). Best time to plant new strawberries. Plant out rooted runners. Tidy beds for winter.

Winter (November to January). Plants are dormant and fully hardy in the ground. Container plants benefit from some shelter, as the roots are more exposed to cold in pots. Move pots against a wall or into an unheated greenhouse in the coldest spells. What to do in the garden each month covers the wider year..

Common Strawberry Problems

Lots of leaves, no fruit. Usually too much nitrogen feed, too much shade, or a first-year spring-planted plant putting energy into roots. Switch to high-potassium feed and ensure full sun.

Small or misshapen berries. Often poor pollination (cold weather keeping bees away) or old tired plants past their best. Replace plants over three years old.

Fruit rotting on the plant. Grey mould from damp and poor airflow. Space plants properly, water at the base, lift fruit on straw, remove affected berries fast.

Crowns rotting over winter. Waterlogged soil. Improve drainage or grow in pots and raised beds.

Plant looks healthy but never crops well. May be planted too deep (crown buried) or too shallow. The crown should sit exactly at soil level.

Yellowing leaves. Can be nutrient deficiency in old compost, or simply the natural die-back of older leaves. Feed and remove the worst leaves.

Common Questions About Planting Strawberries

When is the best time to plant strawberries in the UK?

Late summer to early autumn (late August to October) is the best time to plant strawberries in the UK. Plants establish their roots before winter and give a full crop the following summer. Spring (March to April) is the second option, but spring-planted strawberries often produce little fruit in their first year as they put energy into establishing.

Can you plant strawberries in spring?

Yes, March to April is a fine time to plant strawberries, and it is when most garden centres sell them. The trade-off is that spring-planted strawberries usually crop poorly in their first summer. Many gardeners pinch off the first flowers to build a stronger plant, giving up year-one fruit for a much bigger crop the following year.

How far apart should strawberry plants be?
Space strawberry plants 30 to 40cm apart, with 60 to 75cm between rows. They spread wider than people expect, and crowded plants suffer from poor airflow, more disease, and smaller fruit. Plant with the crown sitting exactly at soil level, neither buried nor with roots exposed.

Can you grow strawberries in pots?
Yes, strawberries are one of the best fruits for containers. Use a pot at least 20cm across per plant, or a hanging basket for trailing everbearing types. Growing in pots keeps fruit off the ground and away from slugs. Container strawberries need regular watering and a high-potassium feed every two weeks while fruiting.

How do you grow strawberries from runners?
In summer, strawberry plants send out runners with baby plants at the ends. Peg a plantlet into a pot of compost next to the parent, keep it watered, and once it roots in 4 to 6 weeks, snip the connecting runner. You now have a free new plant to move in early autumn. This is how one plant becomes a whole bed.

Why does my strawberry plant have no fruit?
The most common causes are too much nitrogen feed (which pushes leaves over fruit), not enough sun, or a first-year spring-planted plant establishing roots. Use a high-potassium feed like tomato feed, give the plant full sun, and be patient with spring plantings. Plants over three years old also crop less and are worth replacing.

How long do strawberry plants last?
Strawberry plants are most productive in their first three years, after which cropping declines. The good news is they produce runners every summer that root into free new plants. By taking a few runners each year and replacing tired plants every three years, you can keep a strawberry bed going indefinitely without buying new plants.

A Sensible Place to Start

If you have never grown strawberries, here is the plan. Buy three or four potted summer-fruiting plants and a couple of everbearers in late summer. Plant them in a sunny spot in soil improved with compost, 30 to 40cm apart, with each crown sitting right at soil level. Or, if your soil is heavy or space is tight, plant them in pots and hanging baskets of peat-free compost instead. Water them in, feed with tomato feed every two weeks once they flower next spring, and net them against birds as the fruit ripens.

That handful of plants will give you a proper crop next June, and runners through the summer to make as many free new plants as you want. After twenty years of growing them, strawberries are still the fruit I would tell any beginner to start with.

How to Contact the Editor

If you have comments or you know I have given wrong advice then please contact me by email at

info@yeovil-allotments-association.co.uk

If you have something to contribute or have a say on allotment life, then please use my email to send your contributions.

I am going to process the magazine issue once a month, so if there are comments you would like to make they can be answered in future editions.

I would like to add that most of the articles are taken off the web and some well known gardening and allotments magazines have been read in the making of our magazine content.

We also have our own website at :

www.yeovil-allotments-association.co.uk

where you can find this magazine as well as a catalogue

Happy Allotmenteering and best wishes,

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