

Growing Strawberries in Hot Climates

By: Tim Carpenter

Growing strawberries can be fun and rewarding or frustrating. Everyone wants to grow strawberries. Knowing what variety to grow and when to plant is the most important factor in growing strawberries successfully, anywhere. Florida, the second largest strawberry growing area in the country, after California, has the ideal climate for growing strawberries. However, this is only during the winter months, October through April. Special commercial, disease resistant, good tasting strawberries are grown in Florida. The local gardener cannot buy these varieties, such as Sweet Charlie, because they are not available in small quantities, unless you know a commercial grower.

It is important to know that each variety has its own season. Sweet Charlie will flower in October and bear from November through May and sometimes into early June. It will not bear fruit during the summer or early fall. There are other varieties that will fruit during the summer, but not in large quantities and the flavor is not as good. Cool nights allow the strawberry to make carbohydrates and sugars. The summer nights are just too warm in Florida and most of the South. Winter varieties should be planted in late September or early October.

Other varieties that are grown in Florida are Camarosa, Chandler and Selva. More varieties have been developed by the University of Florida and will be available in the near future. Strawberry plants are normally only available in the early spring. These plants are called ‘everbearers’ and sometimes may be referred to as “Junebearers”. These are actually not varieties that are suitable for Florida plus they are usually planted at the wrong time. “Junebearer” are just what the name indicates and they bear in June and perhaps into early July. These are great varieties for the North or even the central part of the U.S., but not for Florida. Everbearers should bear all the time according to the name, but they don’t. If they do the quantity and quality is usually not very good. A few everbearers are grown in Florida such as Selva and Pacific. Everbearers that don’t do well in Florida are Tristar and Tribute. Quinalt and Ozark Beauty may do well, but may not survive the summer heat. New everbearers being tested are Aromas and Diamante.

Strawberries are perennials so they should live through the summer, but some do and some don’t. Heat, watering, root and leaf diseases all contribute to death of the plant. Cold and dehydration are the normal causes of plant death in the winter. Diseases are another destroyer of plants and are often a problem that is difficult to diagnose. Insects destroy plants and strawberries are very susceptible to damage from spider mites. For example, spider mites are usually present when a plant turns brown and a little web forms on the leaves. Safe insecticides and fungicides are available at your local nursery. However, some very safe and inexpensive controls include Dawn detergent, hydrogen peroxide, hydrogen peroxide with vinegar, alcohol and soap, baking soda, pepper wax and seaweed extracts. Frequent application is important. Always remove dead leaves.

Commercial varieties are brought into Florida in late September and October. Gardening varieties arrive in January or February and are usually bare root. They are rooted locally or sold as bare root plants. Commercial varieties are live ‘green top’ plants or “plugs” (rooted in a soil or potting soil in a tray). Plug plants are the best. “Everbearer” is not a variety, but a type of plant.

Fertilization is the third most important factor in growing strawberries successful. Most gardeners over fertilize their strawberry plants with too much nitrogen and not enough trace minerals such as iron, zinc, and manganese. Use a low nitrogen fertilizer such as 5-10-25 on strawberry plants. Do not use a 20-20-20 or high nitrogen formula. However, a “slow release” such as 14-14-14 is okay when used in moderation.

Water and fertilizing at the same time is preferable. A dilute balanced fertilizer solution should be applied frequently rather than a lot of fertilizer all at one time. Apply only water during the dormant or non-flowering stage. Do not apply fertilizer when the plant is dormant. Water quality is also a factor. Strawberry plants do not like salts that are not usable by the plant. Do not use “softened” water. Softeners take out the good salts such as calcium, magnesium and sulfur while replacing them with sodium and chloride. Soft water should be used for washing clothes and bathing only. De-ionized water and water purified with reverse osmosis is good for plants. However, natural water is hard to beat.

Soil types are also very important for strawberry plants. A sandy soil with a reasonable amount of organic matter is ideal and this is the type of soil found in most good farming areas of Florida. Most of the soils in Florida are too sandy and sandy soils require frequent watering. The soil can be adjusted by adding an organic base such as worm castings, peat, coconut fiber or compost. Use manure with caution because they normally contain too much nitrogen.

The pH, a measure of acid or base in the soil, is another factor that is controllable. Natural acids such as sulfur or calcium sulfate are available. Do not use lime on strawberry plants. Synthetic salts are usually pH adjusted, but they can still be too high for strawberry plants. The soil or media pH should be 6.0 or as low as 5.5. This is lower than the normal pH in garden potting soils or in Florida sandy soils. Organic acids are also available for lowering the pH. It is rare to have to raise the pH (7.0 is neutral, 8.0 is basic and 6.0 is acidic) of the soil.

For further information on strawberry growing, diseases and nutrition review our web site at www.vertigro.com.

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