



Growing Small Fruit in the Home Garden

We usually think of vegetables when considering growing our own food, but there are many small fruits we can grow too. You should try growing strawberries, raspberries or blueberries this summer. They are rich in vitamins and are loaded with antioxidants.

Strawberries

Strawberries are easy to grow. A single plant can produce one quart of berries.

Plant strawberry plants in well-drained soil rich with organic matter. Fertilize the area before planting with a balanced fertilizer at a rate of 1 pound per 100 square feet. Dig it in to a depth of six to eight inches deep. Do not plant them where tomatoes, potatoes, peppers or eggplant have been grown in the past. These plants may harbor verticillium wilt - a serious disease for strawberries.

For the best berry production, plant them in full sun. They will produce fruit, however, in as little as six hours of sun a day. Strawberries need one to two inches of water per week during the growing season. Mulch will help

the soil retain moisture and prevent fruits from laying on the soil.

There are three types of strawberry plants - June bearing, ever-bearing, and day neutral. June bearing strawberries produce berries for two to three weeks in the spring. They produce the biggest berries and send out lots of runners. Ever-bearing strawberries produce berries during three periods: spring, summer and fall. They do not produce many runners. Day neutral varieties produce berries throughout the growing season and send out a few runners.

There are several planting methods from which to choose. The matted row system is best for June bearing cultivars. The plants should be set about two feet apart in rows three to four feet apart. Allow runners to root and become daughter plants that form a matted row no wider than two feet.

The spaced-row method limits the number of daughter plants allowed to grow. Mother plants are planted two feet apart in rows three to four feet apart. The daughter plants are spaced to root no closer than four inches apart and all other runners are

removed. This method takes more care, but results in higher yields, larger berries and fewer problems with disease.

The hill method is the best way to grow day neutral and ever-bearing strawberries. All the runners are removed so only the original mother plant remains. This causes the mother plant to develop more flowers. Plants are arranged in groups of two to four with a two-foot area between each group.

Raspberries

Raspberries begin to ripen shortly after strawberries. Although it takes two years to establish a raspberry plant, it will continue to produce raspberries for many years with proper care.

Plant raspberry plants in well-drained soil amended with lots of organic matter. They prefer to be planted in a sunny spot. Like strawberries, don't plant them where tomatoes, potatoes or eggplants have been grown previously.

Fertilize twice after planting: ten days after planting and then again a month later. Apply one pound of fertilizer for every 100-foot row. In following years,

fertilize before new growth canes to about 4 feet. After Set plants five feet apart in soil appears in spring and again in harvest, prune out canes that amended with lots of peat moss. May with two to three pounds per produced fruit. Place a thick layer of mulch around plants. Fertilize with half 100-foot row.

Ever-bearing red varieties can be pruned like summer-bearing types to produce fruit once or twice a year. Or you can cut all their canes to the ground in early spring and get one crop. Blueberry plants begin to produce fruit in their third season, but are not fully productive until they've been planted for six years. They produce the most fruit when planted in full sun, but will perform adequately when partly shaded for part of the day. Raspberries can be grouped by the color of their fruit (red, black or yellow) or when they bear fruit (summer-bearing or ever-bearing). Reds are first to ripen followed by black and then yellow. Reds also tend to have the largest berries. Black raspberries are pruned three times a year – once in spring, again in summer, and finally after fruiting. In spring, lateral branches are cut back to eight to ten inches. In summer, the top two to three inches of new shoots are removed. After harvesting the berries, remove all canes that produced fruit. Raspberry plants may need staking. Staking helps keep fruit off the ground and makes harvesting easier.

Summer-bearing raspberries only produce one crop in the summer; ever-bearing varieties can produce two crops each year – one in spring and one in fall. Although there are three types of blueberries, the highbush type is recommended for our area. These do not need two different cultivars to cross pollinate to produce berries, but more and bigger berries will result if you plant at least two different cultivars.

Plants can be set two feet apart in rows or in hills three to six feet apart depending on the types of raspberries. Reds grow best in rows; black and yellow grow best in hills. Blueberries have shallow roots and will need additional water during dry periods in summer. Mulching your blueberries will help retain moisture in the soil. They especially need water when berries are developing but be careful not to overwater. Blueberries hate poorly drained areas.

Raspberries take a fair amount of space. Planting them too closely together results in competition for nutrients and increases the chance of disease. The most important requirement for growing blueberries is acidic soil. Because our northern Illinois soils are not naturally acidic, lots of organic matter should be added and the pH must be corrected before planting. Blueberries require a soil with a pH of 4.8 to 5.2. Sulfur should be added to lower the soil pH. **Blueberries**