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GARDEN NOTES

HOME GROWN STRAWBERRIES ARE ALWAYS BETTER

By Dennis Hinkamp

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Many people tell me that the strawberries they buy in the store are not as good as the ones they grow on their own, says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist. This is because most commercially-grown strawberries are bred for size, color, shipping ability and disease and insect resistance. Flavor is just something they hope for, and sadly, do not often achieve.

To get great tasting strawberries raise them yourself, Goodspeed says. Fortunately, strawberries are one fruit that is relatively easy to grow, requires little space and is somewhat ornamental. Strawberries can be grown in containers, gardens, flowerbeds, barrels and even in old tires.

There are three types of strawberries, he explains. They are June-bearing, ever-bearing and day neutral. June-bearing produce one large crop in early summer. They normally begin production in early to mid-June and produce berries for about three weeks. They normally produce a large quantity of berries all at once that can be made into preserves or eaten by hungry children.

June-bearing strawberry plants are generally aggressive and large, Goodspeed says. A couple of varieties that are available in local nurseries or garden centers include Allstar, Sequoia, Guardian and Surecrop.

“Ever-bearing strawberries produce about three crops during the season,” he says. “Typically, their largest crops are in mid-June and in September. They also produce a lighter crop about mid-summer. Ever-bearing strawberries are not particularly aggressive plants and bear small to medium sized fruit. The Fort Laramie variety is one of my favorites for flavor.”

Day-neutral strawberries are sort of “dabblers,” he says. They produce berries throughout the growing season, but never produce a large amount at any given time, and just seem to dabble in the production business. They only grow enough berries to cover oatmeal about once a week.

There are many varieties of day-neutral strawberries, he adds. A couple of common ones that are available locally include Hecker, Tri-star and Brighton. Day-neutral plants are not as aggressive as June-bearers.

“Strawberry plants produce stolons (most people call them runners), which have a

tendency to root and start new plants,” Goodspeed says. “The new plants are commonly called daughter plants, and the original plant is known as the mother. When allowed to continually root, what was once a row of strawberries soon becomes a matted mess. That is okay if you wanted a groundcover, but a thick mat of strawberry plants is not good if your goal is fruit production.”

Each strawberry plant needs its own space, he says. Leave 10 to 12 inches between plants, which means you have to be tough and either cut off the daughter plants, or dig them up if they start to grow. Thin the patch every spring and maybe again in mid summer.

Remember, more plants does not mean more berries, he says. Realize that every plant is competing for the same water, light, space and nutrients. Too many plants means the available resources are spread thinner between each plant. This means fewer, smaller berries to top your oatmeal, which is never good.

“Weeds also tend to compete for the available resources with berry plants,” Goodspeed says. “I like to plant my berries in a weed barrier fabric or black plastic. This helps eliminate weeds, conserves water and also helps keep the plants from getting too crowded.

“Birds, slugs, snails and children are the major pests of strawberries. Bird netting is about the only way to reduce the amount of berries they eat. The plastic or fabric mentioned earlier helps reduce slug and snail problems, or you can use traps and baits.”

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