

# Summer's berry best

Secrets for growing strawberries | *By Nancy Crowe*



PHOTO BY ISFARA ON PIXABAY

otherwise in need of fresh, nutritious food. “People who are struggling, I think, need top shelf food, not bottom shelf food,” he said.

Top shelf means not only fresh and nutritious, but clean.

According to the Environmental Working Group, USDA tests found that strawberries were the fresh produce item most likely to be contaminated with pesticides, even after rinsing. They’ve repeatedly topped the EWG’s Dirty Dozen list.

Not the strawberries from Ritter’s farm, which is certified sustainable by Purdue University and by Certified Naturally Grown, a peer-review process.

Strawberries awaken memories of visits to u-pick farms, lakeside picnics and luscious desserts. For gardeners, they not only tempt the taste buds, but make us want to grow them.

I’ve never tried growing them myself. However, curiosity and concern over clean produce led me to find someone who not only grows strawberries, but grows strawberries that are free of pesticides and other nasty stuff.

Rick Ritter is a fellow Purdue Advanced Master Gardener and co-founder, with Scott Krieg, of the Three Rivers Fruit Growers Club. All of the food he grows on his seven-acre southwest Allen County property is donated, primarily to St. Mary’s Soup Kitchen.

As a trauma therapist for many years, Ritter saw clients who were homeless or

*Here are a few best-berry tips:*

**BUY CLOSE TO HOME**

Purdue University Cooperative Extension lists three types of strawberries. June-bearing strawberries fruit once per season; ever-bearing generally fruit twice; and day-neutral fruit several times.

Ritter primarily grows two strawberry cultivars from bare-root plant starts. One is the June-bearing “Whopper” (“a really big berry, very flavorful”) from Gurney’s Seed & Nursery Co., which grows its plants in Tipp City, Ohio. The other is the ever-bearing “Seascape” from Indiana Berry & Plant Co. in Plymouth, a business with which he’s established a long relationship.

Getting plants that are acclimated to our region is critical to strawberry suc-

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cess, said Ritter. Plants from California might do well this summer, but likely not survive an Indiana winter even if they're mulched with straw. Gardeners should also buy the most disease-resistant cultivars they can find.

## LOCATION AND PLANTING

Strawberry plants should ideally have sunlight for two-thirds of the day and not be in low or moist areas, said Ritter. If you have a strawberry bed next to a sidewalk, he added, putting salt on the sidewalk in winter will kill the plants.

Once you've identified a prospective location or two, get your soil tested. Strawberries like a slightly acidic soil, meaning the pH level should be 5.5 to 6.5. Your soil test report will tell you if and how any amendments should be made. (Locally owned nurseries, I would add, are great at providing further help.)

The best time to plant strawberry plants is late May at the earliest, said Ritter. "The soil temperatures need to be warm enough to kick-start those plants."

It's important to set plants in the ground with the crown — the part from which the leaves sprout — level with the soil surface. Planting too deep may result in too much moisture and, hence, rotting. "Get it too high, it's going to dry up

or burn up and you're going to kill it that way," said Ritter. Ask the seller for help if you're unsure.

The usual guidelines are to space strawberry plants 6 to 8 inches apart, but Ritter said he's planted them closer, especially in raised beds.

## CARE

As with most plants, a soaker hose that sends water directly to the roots is the best choice. "If you're watering from above, the leaves get too wet and they stay wet," said Ritter.

Staying wet makes leaves prone to fungus, which is never a good thing. "You need sunlight and air movement to keep things healthy."

To that end, Ritter uses 1 1/2 to 2 inches of organic straw as mulch. The plant grows up through the mulch and the fruit rests on the straw rather than the soil, which helps prevent soil-borne disease.

## OF COURSE, THERE'S MORE

More details can be found in the Purdue publication, "Growing Strawberries." Type "Purdue HO-46" into your browser and it should pop right up.

The Old Farmer's Almanac has information, with a video, at [www.almanac.com/plant/strawberries](http://www.almanac.com/plant/strawberries).

## READY-MADE BERRY BLISS

Better at eating strawberries than growing them? Visit [pickyourown.org](http://pickyourown.org) to find a strawberry farm near you (call the farm to verify). Or visit a local farm market for fresh strawberries and baked goods containing them.

Sadly, Auburn's Strawberries in the Park fundraiser has been cancelled due to the new coronavirus. The Auburn Garden Club plans to bring back the sweet event — with fresh strawberries on homemade shortcakes with ice cream and whipped cream — next year.

— NC

## IN A POT? WHY NOT?

Container gardening has come a long way. In addition to those urn-shaped, terra cotta strawberry pots with pockets, you can find stackable plastic trays, PVC pipes with holes and more. Your local nursery may have, or be able to suggest one, that will work for your garden or deck.

— NC



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