

## **STRAWBERRIES – WHY THEY ATTRACT BIRDS, LOOKING AFTER PLANTS, TAKING RUNNERS AND PLANTING OUT**

**How to get a fair share of your strawberries when every other creature in the garden wants some too.**

Strawberries and cream are what summer is all about. It's not too surprising that sweet, fragrant strawberries are our favourite fruit,. This universal appeal was noted by Thomas Hyll in his 'Gardener's Labyrinth' (1593): "They be much eaten at all men's tables in the sommer time with wine and sugar". I suspect, though, that a few of us might prefer cream to wine, even if it's a delightful rosé, straight from the fridge.

What we don't always realise is that, along with birds, toads and many other creatures, we are willingly doing what the strawberry wants. In 'The Origin of Species' [1859], Charles Darwin hit the nail on the head: "a ripe strawberry or cherry is pleasing to the eye and to the palate. But this beauty serves merely as a guide to birds and beasts, in order that the fruit be devoured and the matured seeds disseminated."

Plants need birds to broadcast their seed widely, so use colour to send out the right signals. When the fruit starts off white and inedible, the seeds haven't ripened, but once they've turned from pink to red, the strawberry is ready for help. The bright red fruit is clear to see and stands out in the midst of all the green foliage. Needless to say, no self-respecting bird, or human for that matter, could resist consuming the plant's sweet and tasty fruit. Clearly, the plant wants a bird rather than us to eat its fruit, but, for me, netting remains the way forward, so that we, not our avian friends, are the consumers.

Of course, we selfishly keep the strawberries for ourselves, but there's more to these luscious fruits than meets the eye. These seemingly passive plants are actually manipulating the life around them to disperse their seed. As well as using colour – it could be black, orange, yellow or blue – to attract dispersers, these plants will also use sweetness and sometimes an attractive, fragrant smell to intimate when the seed is ripe. The bird or animal has little choice but to do the strawberry's bidding.

Meanwhile, let's enjoy this bountiful harvest and take steps to prepare our crop for next summer. The first task after harvesting is to cut away all the old growth and remove and compost the straw round the plants. Just be careful you don't encounter a sleepy wasp lazily gorging a half rotted berry! The next step is to clean up the plants and though it sounds cruel to practically scalp them, this good hygiene gives your strawberries the best chance of avoiding one of the many disease to which they are susceptible. By cutting away the old leaves, preferably with secateurs, you give the crowns space and time to form next year's young buds.

In tidying up the crowns, you'll need to remove a forest of runners that will have been spreading everywhere unless you've been very methodical and cut out shoots as they form. Interestingly, the word, strawberry, has nothing to do with the straw we use to protect the berries: the Anglo Saxon word describes the runners as 'strewing' or spreading all round the mother plant.

It does pay to spare one 'strewing' runner per healthy plant. Strawberries will fruit successfully for 3 years, but are likely to succumb to viral attack after that, so by taking one strong runner from a two year old crown, you can restock with healthy young plants. Nip off any shoots coming from them and then either peg down the 'umbilical cord' connecting the runner to its

parent, or with cord attached, plant the runner into a 7cm pot. I prefer this second method as it's much easier to move the young plant to its new position in the autumn.

The spacing should be about 30cm between the plants, and 60cm between rows. In 'Gardening in the North' [1909], the Dumfries gardener, S. Arnott, recommended 60cm between plants and 90cm between rows – a little excessive, perhaps, especially as he insisted that the ground between the rows should " be deeply dug as soon as is convenient after the crop has been gathered... with the addition of a little manure."

Whether you decide on 21<sup>st</sup> Century or Edwardian spacing, it is important to replant on fresh ground because strawberries are so disease-prone that they need to be on a four year rotation. The soil should be reasonably fertile and free-draining and a sunny, well sheltered spot will provide best results. When planting in the autumn, it's essential to get the depth right – the base of the crown should be at ground level; it will rot when buried too deeply and dry out with exposed roots. If by any chance you have space in a polytunnel, or can use a cloche, why not plant some early strawberries, like 'Honeoye'? They'll come a fortnight earlier than usual and if you have a dozen plants, you'll get a decent picking. Believe me, it's well worth that wee bit of space!

If this all sounds a bit intimidating and you don't have space in the garden to grow the strawberries you simply must have, planters, growbags, strawberry towers and window boxes will work for you, but that's a job for next spring.