

Tasty strawberries for containers

No summer is complete without strawberries.

When buying new strawberry plants, especially if space is at a premium, you'll want varieties that crop over several weeks. And also why not track down plants that are a wee bit different?

Although breeders have greatly improved on size and disease resistance, they're also rediscovering the characteristics of much older varieties. Writing at the end of the 16th Century, John Gerard referred to several different types and colours. White strawberries were quite common and even green fruited ones, *Fragaria viridis*, weren't unknown. He also mentioned a variety with fruits growing on runners.

Gerard was thinking of wild or alpine strawberries, *Fragaria vesca*, the ones the Romans had enjoyed. It's claimed that in the 14th Century, Charles V of France had 1200 strawberry plants in his garden. Although these early European plants fruited for several weeks, the berries were small, so it's scarcely surprising that they went out of fashion when varieties with larger fruits, *Fragaria virginiana*, started appearing from North America, possibly as early as 1556. Another, Chilean, plant, *F. chiloensis*, made its European debut two centuries later. The stage was now set for a breeding extravaganza.

Breeders largely concentrated on developing the large, red strawberries we now grow. These popular varieties were crosses between Virginian and Chilean species. But the more interesting European alpine flavour was later added to the mix.

The alpine characteristics are a boon for gardeners with very little space for strawberries. They thrive in pots or hanging baskets and often fruit over several weeks. I'll mention a few. Mara des Bois offers that wonderful aromatic flavour of tiny wild alpine in the larger berries we normally expect. The deep red berries keep on coming – providing enough for a secret nibble or in a fruit salad or muesli.

Flamenco is another of these perpetual or 'everbearing' strawberries suitable for growing in pots. They, too fruit over several weeks. And Mount Everest is, unsurprisingly, a climber, with fruiting runners reaching a metre or so. This lets you train it up a trellis or watch it cascade from a window box or hanging basket.

For added interest, try mixing some white strawberries with red ones. White Surprise is one of the new white pineberries that have started appearing in the catalogues. This pineapple-strawberry is only pineapple-flavoured and is not related to that other mouth-watering fruit.

This tasty Chilean-Virginian hybrid has had a chequered career. It had always produced a tiny crop of small berries and had nearly died out by the end of last century. But in 2003, a Dutch grower, Hans de Jongh, rescued the plant and, after 6 years, was able to launch it on the Continent. It first appeared in the UK in 2011. The massively improved pineberry is a welcome addition to the garden.

But the original Chilean berry was female-only and had to be cross-pollinated with another species. This also applies to the modern cultivars, so when you buy these plants, you'll be given some red strawberries for pollination. Scarcely a problem, I'd guess.

If you want to blow your taste buds with a raspberry-strawberry flavour as well as pineapple, try the strasberry, *Fragaria x ananassa* 'Mieze Schindler'. Like the pineberry, the strasberry

owes its name to the flavour combination: it isn't a cross with rasps. And, it too is a female plant, so needs another strawberry for pollination.

The strasberry had been first bred in Chile early last century, and, after nearly going extinct, was also recued by de Jongh. This unusual fruit is smaller than normal strawberries and does look very like a raspberry. Strawberries and rasps are two of my favourite fruits – let's see how they blend.