

Bell County Master Gardeners
Tip of the Week
By Candy Mullen
“Valentine’s Day and Strawberries”

I was strolling through the grocery store and saw all the chocolate and strawberries in preparation for the Valentine’s Day coming and remembered how good those strawberries are fresh picked from the garden! Wild strawberries, *Flagaria vesca*, grow in many places. They are actually part of the rose family and are considered herbs also. They are fairly easy to grow and take care of. The plants produce for about 5 years before they get “tired” and you should replace them. Each plant should produce about one quart of strawberries a year.

You will need a bed in full sun, well-drained sandy loam, and it must not be where tomatoes, potatoes, peppers, or eggplant have been grown recently (verticillium rot). You should plant in the spring as soon as the soil can be worked or in the late fall. Use a basic fertilizer and rich organic soil. Use straw mulch for clean berries. Select plants with large crowns and light –colored roots. Make a hole large enough to spread the roots. Hill the center of the hole and place the crown at soil level. Spread the roots downward on the hill Bury the plant so the soil only goes halfway up the crown. Strawberry plants have runners so space (approx. 18 inches) must be allowed for them to grow, so don’t crowd the plants. If you don’t have a great deal of space, the strawberry pots are good also for a delicious harvest.

Water is very important for strawberries! You need about one to two inches per week for juicy fruit. It is especially important while the fruit is forming, from early bloom to the end of harvest. Strawberries are their sweetest when fully ripened on the plants. This usually means leaving them on the plant for a day or two after they are fully colored. Of course the birds will love that, so cover your plants with bird netting before they ripen!

There are basically three types of strawberry plants for the home gardener: June bearing, Everbearing, and Day Neutral. June bearing produce one crop for about 2-3 weeks in spring; Everbearing will produce 2-3 crops during spring, summer and fall; and Day Neutral will produce fruit throughout the

growing season. Everbearing and Day Neutral are great for limited space as they produce few runners. Their fruits are usually smaller but still tasty. Research the kinds and select what will be best for you. I can tell you that until you have bitten into a juicy strawberry fresh from the garden, you haven't tasted one of the delights of your life!

Have any questions about gardening in Central Texas? Contact ask.bcmqa@gmail.com

