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Summer's Plump Little Success Story

By Anne Raver, New York Times

I HAVE been grazing on the Alpine strawberries in my walled perennial garden every day for almost two months now. Some mornings, I take out a bowl of granola and milk, pluck a dozen ripe berries, and sit down to breakfast right there.

I inhale the spicy scent of Zéphirine Drouhin, my old pink climbing rose; I see how nicely my purple clematis is covering the sunny, south-facing stone wall; I listen to the drone of bumblebees nuzzling the blue flowers of the catmint. I also see how the goutweed is smothering the ginger, how my precious Graham Thomas rose is refusing to bloom in a too-shady corner, how the five-foot stems of my white Henryi lilies will no doubt topple over if I don't get out there and stake them.

Never mind all that. This is a success story — about how easy it is to grow *Fragaria vesca*, the Alpine strawberry. Unlike regular strawberries, which put out long runners in the garden (a good thing, if you have the time to replant the young plants, or pups; a pain if you don't), Alpine varieties grow in tidy mounds perfect for pots or edging pathways and borders. They also produce all summer long, right up to frost.

But forget about ease and productivity. It was Renee Shepherd's description of eating them that inspired me to start them from seed two winters ago: "an intensely concentrated flavor," she writes, "with a taste that seems to combine the essence of strawberries, roses and pineapples."

Ms. Shepherd, who owns Renee's Garden Seeds (reneesgarden.com; 888-880-7228), a mail-order company, in Felton, Calif., offers a variety called Mignonette (they're listed under "Herbs"), which is popular in France and Holland, but little known here. And now, as I search for my own plump little Mignonettes, hidden among the mounds of serrated leaves, and pop most of them into my mouth, I realize that their fragrance is inseparable from their flavor — to me, somewhere between pineapple and honey — and it lingers, like a good gewürztraminer, at the back of the throat.

The good news is, you can start seeds of Alpine strawberries right now, just as you would any perennial. Just plant them in a seed bed, in a sunny part of the garden, and don't let the soil dry out. (I have found that starting perennial seeds in big pots or trays filled with sterile potting soil, placed in full sun in the garden, helps prevent young seedlings from being overtaken by weeds. But it's imperative to keep the soil moist.)

These plants won't bear fruit this year, but they will form sturdy little clumps that will survive the winter and bear fruit by late spring next year.

I started my own seeds indoors, two Februarys ago, in a tray of sterile potting soil that I covered with a plastic top and set on the concrete floor of my kitchen, which the radiant heating keeps at a toasty 68 degrees.

The seeds were slow to germinate, just as Ms. Shepherd warns in her online instructions. But in about a month, the tiny first leaves appeared, and I placed the tray under fluorescent lights in the cellar. (I always think this must be a grim way to start life for a plant, growing toward a jittery light, with shelves full of dusty Mason jars and defunct freezers looming in the darkness, but they seem to get along just fine.)

Their true leaves — pleated, like tiny parasols — soon formed, and I thinned them out, to about three inches apart. Thinning young plants is one of the hard lessons to learn, but crowded seedlings don't thrive, so toss out more than you leave, and give all your attention, like a mother duck, to the best of the brood.

By the end of March, I transplanted my babies to individual pots, to allow for deeper root growth; by mid-April, I set them outside for a few hours, in a shady, protected part of the porch, and gradually acclimated them to full sun.



Credit Renee's Garden

Alpine strawberries, once a favorite of Thomas Jefferson's, are easy to grow, ornamental and an intensely flavorful instant breakfast.

In another week, I put them in the garden, spacing them about a foot apart, in a circle around an old grinding stone, the focal point of our little walled garden, which is actually the stone foundation of an old chicken house.

Ms. Shepherd notes how ornamental these plants are, how nicely they edge a path or border, or dangle from pots, covering themselves with little white flowers with gold centers, which soon turn to tiny red fruit, about the size of a thimble.

It's quite an art to pick them at exactly the right moment. Too new, and they will be sour; too old, tasteless and mushy. But eat enough of them, and you will soon catch on.

Alpine strawberries thrive in well-draining, slightly acid soil; they prefer full sun, but can tolerate dappled shade.

"They will produce more if they have light," Ms. Shepherd told me on the phone from California. "But they need water, or the berries get withered and don't taste so good."

She feeds her Mignonettes, which grow in big pots, with a half-strength solution of fish emulsion and sea kelp every two weeks. I fertilize mine about once a month, because they are growing in fertile soil, and I'm amazed at their constant flowering and fruiting.

Last year, they began to bloom by early June, were producing fruit by July, and didn't stop until a hard frost finally arrived in November. This year, they started producing in early May.

Their growth is almost alarming. "I divide mine every couple seasons," Ms. Shepherd said. "And I have plants that are six or seven years old." In mild climates, like California, they self-sow. "So I'll be interested if they do that for you," she said.

On our old farm in central Maryland, temperatures, as in Long Island and southern New Jersey, rarely fall below zero. So if cherry tomatoes self-sow here, why not Alpine strawberries?

I was interested to read in the *Twinleaf Journal*, a publication about Thomas Jefferson's horticultural adventures published by the Center for Historic Plants at Monticello, Jefferson's home (and available online at twinleaf.org), that Jefferson was besotted with the Alpine strawberry. In fact he was so smitten that he declared, in a letter to James Monroe in 1795, that the berry, along with the skylark and red-legged partridge, was one of "the three objects you should enrich our country with." But by 1812, the article relates, Jefferson had decided that "it would take acres to yield a dish," and banished them from garden to truck patch.

Perhaps the super-size-me generation would feel the same way. But my little Mignonettes produce plenty enough for me.

Of course, Alpine strawberries are so tender, they hardly survive being carried to the kitchen, where you might, if you were able to control yourself, save some for a tart or a dollop of homemade whipped cream. But I have yet to get that far. Usually, I just eat them myself, or take favorite people into the garden and let them graze.

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