

Petite and Sweet Alpine Strawberries

by Renee Shepherd

THE SWEETLY flavored fruits of alpine strawberries (*Fragaria vesca*) are a Continental delicacy and the plants are as attractive as the berries are delicious. The dainty, pointed berries boast an ambrosial woodland flavor that is a combination of strawberry, pineapple, and rose. Alpine strawberry plants are well behaved in the garden and are remarkably easy to grow, so I heartily recommend them to all gardeners who love ornamental edibles.

These comely perennial plants are cultivated strains of wild or woodland strawberries and reportedly were transplanted into European gardens as early as the 12th century. The ancestors of the improved alpiners we grow today were first introduced in Paris more than 100 years ago. Plants develop gracefully rounded mounds of evergreen foliage and yield modest summer-long harvests of delicate three-quarter-inch fruit. In France, where they are called *fraises des*



The fruit of alpine strawberry is smaller than that of common strawberries, but it makes up for its size with intense flavor.

bois, alpine strawberries are carefully hand-harvested seasonal specialties worthy of being served simply with whipped cream and candied violets in crystal gob-

lets as dessert in many fine restaurants.

GROWING GUIDELINES

Alpine strawberries grow best in USDA Hardiness Zones 5 (with protection) through 9. Young plants are often available from garden centers and nurseries, but you can also grow them from seed (see “Planting Basics,” below).

Site alpiners in full sun, although in hot-weather regions, they appreciate some afternoon shade or dappled shade. A rich, fertile, and—above all—well-drained soil is critical to success. Alpiners need little special care beyond consistent moisture

and feeding several times during the growing season with a balanced fertilizer. Mulch the plants to keep roots moist unless snails or slugs are a menace in your garden.

Unlike the commonly cultivated strawberry (*Fragaria ×ananassa*), most varieties of alpine strawberries do not self-propagate by sending out runners.

Planting Basics

Young plants can be purchased through mail-order catalogs or some local nurseries, or you can start your own plants indoors from seed.

GROWING ALPINE STRAWBERRIES FROM SEED

In early spring, sow seeds one inch apart and an eighth-inch deep in a container of moistened, fine seed-starting mix. Provide a strong light source and maintain a temperature of 60 to 70 degrees Fahrenheit until seedlings are ready to plant outdoors. Keep the container evenly moist but not soggy. Seeds may take three to four weeks to germinate.

Feed young seedlings every two weeks with half-strength fertilizer. When they have several sets of leaves, transplant them three inches apart into a deeper container or individual pots so roots have room to develop. When seedlings are three inches tall, gradually acclimate them to outdoor conditions.

PLANTING

Prepare a planting site by incorporating generous amounts of well-rotted organic matter; be sure the soil is well drained. A sunny spot is best, except in very hot climates, where part shade is preferred. Transplant young plants into the garden after all danger of frost has passed and outdoor night temperatures have warmed into the 50 degree range.

SPACING

Space plants about two feet apart. At maturity, most varieties produce a mound 12 inches in diameter.

FRUITING PERIOD

Plants grown from seed started in early spring will produce their first berries the same season.

They'll stay wherever you plant them, gradually growing into soft leafy mounds about a foot or so in diameter and height. After a few seasons, plants can be divided and replanted in early spring to double or triple the size of your planting. Plants bear fruit the first season after sowing or division and continue to be productive for up to four years with regular feeding and watering.

With their neat, serrated leaves, white flowers, and bright red or pale yellow to white berries, alpine strawberries are very ornamental. They are ideal edging plants along a garden path or flower border. They also make handsome additions to rock gardens.

One of my favorite ways to grow alpine strawberries is in containers—in window boxes, patio planters, or cascading from strawberry pots or hanging baskets. They will grow well in any container that is 15 to 18 inches in diameter and at least 12 inches tall. Use fresh, good quality potting soil that has excellent drainage.

PEST AND DISEASE PREVENTION

Alpine strawberry plants are relatively pest-free as long as the soil is consistently moist and well drained. Mulch around plants to protect their shallow root systems from drying summer heat and to retain soil moisture. Where slugs and snails are a problem, be sure to harvest ripe berries regularly, which also encourages more fruit production.

RECOMMENDED VARIETIES

- 'Alexandria' (sometimes listed as 'Alexandra'): a good producer of dark red fruit on mounding plants up to a foot in diameter.
- 'Baron Solemacher': an older selection that is exceptionally winter hardy. It bears aromatic, red fruit on vigorous plants.
- 'Mignonette': a selection of the heirloom 'Reine de Valée' that grows easily from seed, producing small, pointed, scarlet fruit its first year on compact, mounded plants.
- 'Yellow Wonder': very productive variety with fragrant, pale yellow fruit.

ENJOYING THE HARVEST

Pick and enjoy the fruits of alpine strawberries as soon as they turn a rich red and give slightly to the touch. There are also white- and yellow-fruited varieties available, but I like the jewel-tone red ones best for both flavor and appearance.

Seven or eight mature alpine strawberry plants will produce about a cup of petite berries several times a week throughout the season. I often eat them right off the plants in the garden, but they are also delectable and beautiful as garnish for breakfast cereal, pancakes, or waffles, or atop individual tarts. For a wonderful, simple dessert, fold them inside thin crepes with fresh sour cream. 

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