

Do you have any tips for growing strawberries at home? I've seen them being sold in pots at the store, but I am wondering if I need to do it the same way the growers do it with plastic mulch, raised beds and all that.

Growing strawberries is a very complicated business and a short column such as this one is not even close to sufficient space to cover all aspects. That said, gardeners can have success growing strawberries at home by following a few basic principles.

It is common right now to be seeing strawberries being sold for planting in home gardens. Common varieties oriented to the home grower available through local outlets are 'Quinault' and 'Fern' which are decent and should perform well. Others are available through catalogues and can be obtained to stretch fruit production out through the whole season.

One does not need to necessarily use plastic and some of the methods that commercial growers use in producing strawberries. However it is important to select a site with good exposure to the sun, excellent soil drainage and work the soil well before planting. Fertility additives such as well rotted compost or synthetic fertilizers are very useful in enriching the soil for the nutrient hungry strawberry plant. **DO NOT EVER** plant strawberries immediately after a crop of tomatoes, peppers, eggplants or potatoes since each of these propagate the serious strawberry pathogen *Verticillium*. It is best to form beds for the strawberries to facilitate management and drainage. Some sort of cover around the plants such as mulch or straw will be useful in keeping down weeds and maintaining clean fruit.

The strawberries should be removed from the pots they are purchased in and planted in a hole of similar depth in the bed. It is probably best to remove flowers or green fruit that are on the plant at this time since these will stress the plant during the process of establishment. Following several good deep waterings to close pore spaces and fully moisten the area around the transplants, it is recommended to water enough to keep the soil around the plant moist, but not so much that the rest of the plant is wet. Flowers are very sensitive to free moisture, and in all circumstances they should be kept as dry as possible.

The topic of growing strawberries commercially and in the home garden is a very large one so please contact Mark Bolda at UCCE Santa Cruz if you have more questions on this topic or any other topics concerning blackberry, raspberry or strawberry production on the Central Coast of California.