

Festival Strawberries

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There is a new strawberry plant on the market for use in area gardens. It is noteworthy because the team of Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service horticulturists that manage the Texas Superstars designation list have determined that the "Festival Strawberry" is worthy of the designation. Texas Superstar status means that the plant identified has exceptional performance characteristics that apply to planting statewide.

The Texas Superstar Team including Bexar County Horticultural Agent David Rodriguez and Retired Professor Dr Jerry Parsons have described the "Festival" as a producer of medium size fruit that is attractive, flavorful, firm-fleshed, deep red on the outside and bright red on the inside. The fruit is produced on an upright, sturdy plant over a long season from February to May. Each plant produces approximately one and one-half lbs. of fruit. The tasty fruit has a relatively long shelf life.

A lot of gardeners think of planting strawberries in the spring one year and then harvesting the fruit every spring year after year. Here in Texas, however, strawberries are grown as annuals. They are planted now in October and carried through the winter in containers or raised beds to produce fruit for harvest in a single Spring. They are relatively cold tolerant so do not have to be protected unless forecast temperatures are lower than 20 degrees F. They are less able to survive the Texas summer.

Obtain your strawberries in 4-inch containers and transplant them to rows in the raised bed, in hanging baskets, or containers in full sun. The soil needs to be well drained. One plant can reach 24 inches around if they are well fertilized, so plant them one to a 2ft. container or every 2ft. in the row. The idea is to grow one large plant rather than to produce a lot of small plants. Towards that end fertilize generously with Osmocote and remove runners from the plants. It is also recommended to remove the blooms that appear until January. Beginning after the first of the year the blooms will produce fruit to be harvested between February and May.

Strawberries are especially attractive and fun to grow in hanging baskets or layered beds. It is also easier to protect them from pests when grown in such containers. Children sharing in the planting and harvesting are especially fond of this gardening method. Visit plantanswers.com or any of the fruit-growing publications for examples of clever, attractive ways to grow strawberries.

Apply a fine mulch to the soil in the row or container to keep the fruit from laying on the ground. Live oak leaves or a fine bagged material work well.

As you might expect the fruit is a favorite of birds, snails, and other pests. Control slugs, snails, and pill bugs by applying slug and snail bait every few weeks. The beer traps described in last week's column also work. Birds and rodents can be tougher to control. They won't become a problem until January when you start allowing the fruit to mature. In severe situations it may require that you lay bird netting on a frame to keep the birds away from the fruit. Rodents may require traps or poisons for full control.