

## **Life's the Berries, Strawberries That Is**

Strawberries are delicious, nutritious and abundant in the Finger Lakes Region from mid-June to mid-July, always dependent on the vagaries of our changeable weather.

Strawberries are the third most valuable fruit in New York, placing this state seventh in national production. In years with higher than average rainfall and not enough sun, strawberries may not ripen as fully; in hot, very dry years, they can almost sizzle on the vine.

Strawberries can provide unique flavoring from everything from soups to desserts. They are versatile but care needs to be taken in the selection and storage of this fruit. When buying strawberries, purchase only the amount of berries that you can use in a day or two, because they do spoil quickly. To purchase the right quantity for your needs, remember that one quart of fresh strawberries equals five half cup servings. Select the plump, full ripened berries with bright green, fresh-looking caps and avoid soft or moldy berries. Turn them over to see if there are spots of green, white or blue mold on any side of the berry. These are not the berries you want to take home.

To store strawberries well, do not wash them or remove the caps or stems until you are ready to use them. Washing strawberries removes the natural protective outer layer. The best recommendation is to arrange the unwashed berries in a shallow pan that is lined with paper towels. Top the berries with more paper towels and then cover with plastic wrap. You can refrigerate berries in this manner for up to two days to guarantee freshness.

When you are ready to use the strawberries, place them in a large strainer or colander and gently rinse them with cool water. You can remove the caps or stems by either twisting the cap or using the point of a sharp paring knife. A strawberry huller works well, too. Always leave the caps on when you are washing the berries and only remove them after rinsing. The caps keep water from soaking into the berries, which dilutes the flavor and alters the berry's texture.

Strawberries are a wonderfully nutritious fruit. A half-cup serving of raw whole berries contains only approximately 23 vitamin packed calories. There is more vitamin C in this serving than a whole orange, along with smaller percentages of vitamin A, calcium and iron. Strawberries are virtually free of any sodium, fat or cholesterol. They get a bad reputation for calories because they are a main ingredient in jellies and, a personal favorite, my grandmother's strawberry and rhubarb pie. In those cases, it's the added sugar and fat that raises the calorie count.

Because they are relatively easy to grow, strawberries can be a good crop for a home gardener. Strawberries do well in full sun with good drainage and a soil pH between 5.5 and 7.0. If you are considering growing these berries, start improving the soil the year before planting, especially if the pH needs adjusting. Plant in early spring in soil where no strawberries, brambles or crops in the tomato family like potatoes, peppers and eggplants have been grown for several years. Since the plants are shallow rooted, you

need to keep them well watered, especially just after planting. Keep the area weeded especially as you are getting the plants established.

For more information on growing strawberries or on sites for strawberry buying and picking your own berries, call Cornell Cooperative Extension of Ontario County at (585) 394-3977.

Patricia Pavelsky  
Cornell Cooperative Extension of Ontario County  
April 4, 2006