

Strawberry Bed Renewal

As strawberry season comes to a peak, begin thinking about preparing your strawberry bed for next year. Next summer's crop will be affected by the care you give to this year's strawberry bed. The sooner after harvest the patch is cleaned up, fertilized and irrigated, the better the chance of getting a good crop next year.

As soon as harvest has ended, begin cleaning up the patch. If any of your plants have spotted, diseased leaves remove all the leaves in the bed. This removal will cause new, disease-free leaves to develop. This new leaf development will also help to keep weed competition down. A lawn mower or hedge shears can be used to accomplish this. If a mower is used, make sure the mower blade is high enough to avoid hitting the crowns of the plants. This bed renovation is meant to optimize the level of sunlight each plant receives for ideal growth. Strong plant growth in one year results in more fruit the following year.

Another way to maximize plant performance is to thin out your strawberry plants. A full bed of plants means each plant is competing for light, moisture and nutrients. In a small bed, hoeing or hand pulling is easiest. Aim for 4-6" in between plants. For larger beds, a rototiller may be employed. Using this tool, till between rows until each row is approximately 10" wide.

Fertilization is also a key component for a successful strawberry crop. Since spring-bearing strawberry plants put on buds in September or October, mid to late August is the ideal time to fertilize. A complete fertilizer, such as 13-13-13, can be added at a rate of $\frac{3}{4}$ -1 pound per 25 feet of row. If you've completed a soil test for your garden, use the rates provided as they are much more accurate than a general recommendation. If you're using a lawn fertilizer, make sure it does not contain a weed killer or preventer.

Weeds can be another competitor for strawberry plants. Controlling weeds between rows and between plants allows the strawberries to take up the available water and nutrients. Weeds can also shade the plants, so keep the area around your bed mowed. Weeds should be controlled even into the fall.

Irrigation is the final step in a healthy strawberry patch. Irrigate after you fertilize, so that the fertilizer leeches into the soil. As your plants continue to grow, water only when the soil is dry. Water to a depth of 6-10" for optimal root development. Just as with trees and other plants, a wooden dowel or metal rod can help determine the depth of water penetration in the soil. Dry soil will be hard to push the rod through. Continue to water plants through the summer and into the fall for optimal fruit onset.

Renovation, fertilizer and irrigation all help to keep your patch healthy until next year's harvest. Moving into winter, mulch is also key to keeping buds healthy and safe from frost damage. After the plants have been exposed to a few light frosts and stopped growing, mulch can be applied. A severe frost can damage plants. The window of time between Thanksgiving and Christmas is ideal to mulch strawberry beds. A 3" layer of wheat straw makes an excellent winter insulator. Ensure large chunks of straw are broken up and if possible, let the bales sit out (in the rain and sun) over summer to reduce the likelihood of spring weeds appearing. Once plants begin to emerge in the spring, remove the mulch from the crowns, but leave it around the plants to conserve water.