

A Greener View: Strawberry pots

by Jeff_Rugg

Q: A local store is selling strawberry pots already filled with strawberry plants and I was wondering how to take care of them and if this is a good way to grow plants. How long will I get strawberries?

A: Strawberry pots can be a great way to grow strawberries, herbs and small annual flowering plants. A strawberry pot is a flower pot usually less than two feet tall that has a series of holes around the sides where additional plants are planted. They can be made from clay or ceramic pottery, plastic and even wood.

Plastic pots can be lightweight for use on balconies, but they can also blow over. Clay pots that have not been sprayed on the inside with a waterproofing agent such as clear acrylic can break down over a year or two. Untreated pots soak up water from the soil and evaporate it into the air, so they require more careful watering to keep the roots moist. Ceramic pots that are coated on the inside can last, but are often very heavy.

Strawberries can be grown in any container, but these pots offer several advantages to many gardeners for other kinds of plants. They allow several plants to be planted in a very small area. They often have six to eight holes so you can plant six different kinds of herbs in one small spot. They can be placed on a patio or balcony so anyone can grow herbs and strawberries just about anywhere. If you fill the pot with new sterile soil, you won't have any weeding to do and the strawberry roots will have fewer disease problems.

Strawberries are often planted in these pots because they are small plants with a shallow root system, so each plant doesn't compete with the others for water. The fruit will often turn out better as well since they are not growing on the ground where they are susceptible to bacterial and fungal disease problems. Strawberries can be planted in the pots in areas of the country that can't grow them successfully in the ground. The plants are replaced each spring.

All it takes to plant one of these layered pots is to cover the bottom hole with a piece of screen, cloth or anything that will let the water out, but not the soil. Never add a layer of gravel to the bottom of the pot. It does not increase drainage. In fact, it slows the drainage in the bottom layer of soil. Fill the pot to the bottom of the first set of side holes and spread out the plant roots, then add more soil up to the next holes and repeat until you can plant a few in the top. You can add some crumpled up newspaper or sphagnum moss around the

plants to keep the soil from washing out of the hole. If you replace the plants, you should replace at least half the soil, if not all of it.

To make it easier to water every plant in the pot without over-watering the top plants and under-watering the bottom ones, you can insert a pipe into the pot before adding the soil. You can use any type of pipe and all you do is drill holes into it to have water seep out at all levels. If you have a very large strawberry pot, you could set a plastic milk jug in the bottom of the pot. Poke holes in the jug and pipe. Water the pot by filling the milk jug via the pipe. This will allow for a longer soaking of the bottom-level plants without over-watering them. Test the jug before placing it into the pot to see if it slowly drips. You can also use drip irrigation lines running through the center of the pot with an outlet at each plant.

Large strawberry pots filled with wet soil can weigh a lot. It is best to fill and water them where they will be left for the summer. If you use new sterile soil, it will probably have fertilizer in it, but additional slow-release fertilizer will be needed during the summer.

It used to be that strawberries were only available in the spring, but now there are strawberry plants that don't stop producing flowers and fruit all summer long. They are called "day-neutral" since the length of daylight does not affect their flowering. Sometimes they are called "ever bearing" and they make the best varieties for strawberry pots. Tillicum, Ozark Beauty and Quinault are good ever-bearing varieties. It takes about four plants per person to keep enough berries coming, so you may need more than one pot. If the pot is in a cool protected location during the winter, so that the plants and soil don't dry out, the strawberry plants could last several years before you would need to replace them.

If you want to plant herbs or annuals, be sure to get plants that have similar requirements for light and watering. Use small-growing species like parsley, thyme, chives, pansy, nasturtium and viola; the last three have beautiful flowers that are also edible. Avoid invasive plants like mint that will send up new sprouts in all the other openings in the pot.

If you live in a climate that freezes during the winter, you can bring the pot indoors. Strawberries are better off going dormant in the cold, but the pot may freeze and crack, unless it is the plastic kind. Many of the herbs can be grown indoors over the winter in the pot.

Another winter indoor use is to fill the pot with poinsettias, cyclamen, ivy or other indoor houseplants. They make unique planting pots that can add a lot of color and possibly food to the indoor garden.

I use a modern version of the strawberry pot called a "Stack A Pot." It is a series of trays that each holds three plants. They can be stacked to create a column and they come in a variety of diameters. There are versions that can stack on a deck railing and others that can hang. They have several advantages over the old-style pot. I can take off a tray and easily reach the soil and plants on that layer to replace them and then I can change the order of the stacks. They have an overflow between layers and a water holding area in each tray. I water the top layer and once it is full, the water moves down a layer until all the trays are full.

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