

Alpine Strawberries – Small Size, Big Taste

UConn Home and Garden Education Center

ARTICLE BY DAWN PETTINELLI

This past weekend I weeded & mulched the herb garden and was rewarded with a luscious 'Pineapple Crush' alpine strawberry (*Fragaria vesca*). I had started a dozen or so plants from seed at least 15 years ago and their offspring are still growing and producing petite, half-inch long fruit with a mild pineapple infused strawberry flavor. 'Pineapple Crush' not only has a slight pineapple taste but the fruit also has a light pineapple yellow color.

There are several other white or yellow alpine strawberry varieties. 'White Soul' is similar to 'Pineapple Crush' as the berries are a pale yellow with tan seeds. 'White Alpine' boasts of brighter white fruits with eye-catching red seeds. One thing I have noticed about the white fruiting varieties is that birds and other creatures ignore them. White to yellow fruiting strawberries are interesting but red-fruited types rate higher in popularity.

There are several red alpine strawberries available as seeds or as plants. They include 'Red Wonder', 'Alexandria' and 'Baron von Solemacher'. When fully ripe, the small, red fruit exude a most wonderful strawberry fragrance.

Most alpine strawberries do not produce runners. In some instances, such as when using them as a border for a vegetable garden, this would be a

desirable trait. A few varieties, like 'Attila' do produce runners and they would make a great edible groundcover as new plants form at the end of the runners and root.

Alpine strawberries aren't for everyone. Unlike traditional strawberries, which bear a large crop of sizeable, juicy fruits mainly in June, alpine strawberries produce small, fingernail size berries throughout the growing season. These plants, native to parts of Europe, and other continents, have also been referred to as wild or woodland strawberries as well as the French term, 'fraise des bois' meaning strawberry of the woods. Europeans both collected the fruit in the wild and grew wild strawberries in their garden beds.

So why grow alpine strawberries? They are a versatile, tough plant with a small but steady harvest of amazingly flavorful berries. Hardy from USDA zones 3 to 10, they are fairly trouble free perennials that are pretty enough to be included as an ornamental edible in the flower garden as well as in a bed by themselves in hopes of collecting enough for tarts, cordials or fresh eating. Mixed with regular strawberries they make an exceptionally fragrant and tasty jam.

Delicate white flowers with yellow centers are produced on stems that usually rise above the attractive, green, tri-foliolate slightly serrated

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leaves. Five to 11 flowers form on each stalk. If one really desires larger berries, one could pick off all but 2 or 3 flowers per stalk but this is fairly labor intensive.

While traditional strawberries need a full day of sunlight to be productive, these alpine strawberries will produce flowers and fruit with as little as 4 hours of sunlight each day. Their wild counterparts grow naturally on the edges of woodlands where sunlight is usually limited.

Alpine strawberries will be healthier and most productive if given the conditions that they prefer. Plants are shallow rooted so set in a well-draining soil fortified with organic matter. Plants can be fertilized with an all-purpose organic or synthetic vegetable fertilizer when new growth begins, usually in May. The soil should be slightly acidic with a pH of around 6.3. Some limestone may need to be added every 2 to 3 years. Mulch with cocoa or buckwheat hulls, pine needles or other fine mulch to conserve moisture, keep the ripening berries from touching the soil, and to keep the soil cool during periods of hot weather.

One of the most difficult parts of growing alpine strawberries is finding the plants. If they are not offered by your local garden center, you may have to mail order them.

'Another option is starting them from seeds, which actually is not too difficult. Although the seeds are small, they are started similarly to tomatoes. Also, your selection of varieties may be greater when starting from seed than when purchasing plants.

Order seeds in late fall or early winter to start indoors at the end of January or early February. Some sources claim that seeds germinate best if they go through a cold stratification period but others recommend just surface sowing in moistened seed starting medium. It may depend on the variety. Germination rates vary from 60 to 80 percent. If started early in the year, most varieties will produce fruit by late summer or early fall.

If you are looking for some small, attractive, perennial plants for an herb, vegetable or flower garden, check out alpine strawberries. They look good and taste great.

For information on growing alpine strawberries or, on other garden related queries, call the UConn Home & Garden Education Center (toll-free) at (877) 486-6271, visit www.ladybug.uconn.edu or get in touch with your local Cooperative Extension Center.

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