



UNIVERSITY OF
FLORIDA

IFAS EXTENSION

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Enjoy Florida Strawberries

Florida's Plant City strawberries are available now. May is National Strawberry Month, but February and March are our area's peak growing season. Three fourths of the midwinter strawberries in the US are produced in Plant City. It all began in the late 1800's when Mr. Henry Plant's railroad to Tampa allowed farmers to share their winter crop with the rest of the nation. It's now a one hundred million-dollar industry.

Here in Florida we have the cool snaps necessary for the fruit to set but it's still warm enough for strawberries to ripen in the "winter", before it's warm enough in the rest of the country. Strawberries are grown in every state, but Florida is the nation's second largest producer. California is the top producer of summer strawberries..

Strawberries can grow almost anywhere throughout the world. They need little room to grow in a home garden, multiply themselves each year by producing "daughter plants," have no thorns as so many small fruits do, need no trellises and supports, and can produce good crops without much spraying because they bear their fruit (in most parts of the world) before pests get a good start in the garden.

The history of strawberries goes back to the Greeks and Romans. They grew wild in ancient Rome. Several theories have been proposed about the origin of the name "strawberry" itself, but none is convincing. Some say the straw mulch often used in its cultivation inspired the name, some hold that the tiny seeds with which the berry's surface is dotted resembles straw, others claim that the dried berries were once strung on strands of straw for decorations, while still others say that the long, straw-like runners of the mother plant (straw-like when dry) gave the fruit its name. Wherever the name came from, they are still delicious.

There are many varieties of strawberries and the firmer varieties (the ones that will ship more easily) are what we usually find in grocery stores. Strawberries can be picked before totally ripe. They will continue to turn red after being picked, but the flavor won't get any sweeter. This is why our fresher Florida grown, deep red strawberries are so much better. Look for berries that are a full red color and have a bright luster. Large or small berries are equally delicious.

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We used to have a you-pick strawberry garden here in Indian River County. It closed a couple years ago, too bad. If you are where you can pick your own strawberries take along a little pair of scissors. It's better to cut the stem of the fruit than to pull on it to snap the stem. Since the plant is in sand, a good tug can uproot the entire plant and ruin it. Lift up the leaves on the strawberry plants to discover jewels hidden underneath. Look for bright red strawberries that are firm and plump with fresh green caps, Avoid berries that have large uncolored areas or large seedy areas. They may be poor in flavor and texture. A dull shrunken appearance or softness indicates over-ripeness or decay. Mold spreads rapidly from one berry to another, so select berries carefully.

Strawberries are a nutrition power house. They are an excellent source of Vitamin C and Vitamin A. Eight medium strawberries provide as much Vitamin C as a large orange, and those eight berries provide a good source of Magnesium, Phosphorus, Potassium, and Folate, with only 50 calories. They are also a great source of fiber since each strawberry has about 200 tiny seeds.

Once you get strawberries home, put them in a single layer in an airtight container, not stacked or crowded. Don't wash strawberries until you are ready to use them and don't remove the stem until after you have washed them. Washing removes the natural protective outer covering. The cap protects the inside of the fruit from moisture and decay that will cause it to degrade quickly.

To wash strawberries, place them in a colander and rinse under cold running water. Do not allow berries to set in water, as they will lose color and flavor. After washing, allow them to dry on several layers of paper towels.

Strawberries are juicy, sweet snacks and tasty additions to shakes, salads, and desserts. They are also flavorful toppings for breakfast cereals, waffles, pancakes and French toast.

Many people like to make strawberry preserves when the supply is plentiful. Don't try to double the recipes to save time. Jells are specific proportions of acid, sugar and pectin. Strawberries have so much moisture in them that doubled batches almost always come out too liquid.

Enjoy Florida strawberries while they are at their peak. Lots of people enjoy attending the Strawberry Festival in Plant City (in Hillsborough County). The festival is March 3 - 13, 2005.

For more information on Strawberries contact the Indian River County Extension Service, 770-5030.

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