

Strawberries: Oregon vs. California?

It's the great debate in my family. My partner hails from Oregon, and I from California. She insists Oregon's strawberries put California's to shame. I love Oregon's strawberries, but seriously? I was born in the strawberry capital of the world. My birthplace is also the largest grower of strawberries in the state of California, and California is responsible for 85 percent of the nation's supply. While it has the unfortunate name of Oxnard, it's home to what's known as the Oxnard Plain and one of the most agriculturally fertile areas of the world. So I guess you could say I was born with the best strawberries coursing through my veins, but that would be a bit dramatic, no?

A few years back, we held a blind taste test featuring Oregon vs. California strawberries. Several bowls held the red gems, covered so tasters could not see the differences. (Many of the California berries have white centers, whereas Oregon's berries are red throughout). Five of us took turns silently tasting and choosing our favorites, carefully marking our votes and thoughts. Almost everyone at the table was rooting for Oregon, insisting they would be far superior. Alas, California's strawberries won our taste test. There was much shouting—but then we all dug into some strawberry shortcake and it didn't really matter. Strawberries are delicious when they're in season.



the sassy gardener

BY LEANN LOCHER

You may have heard Oregon's strawberry season is running late this year due to our cool spring and the delay of warm temperatures. It doesn't mean it will be a bad season, just a little later to the table. I've seen berries at the local farmers markets early on thanks to growing them in protected greenhouses or under hoop houses, and of course California's strawberries are available at the supermarkets. But I have a soft spot for having strawberries ripe from the picking, and Oregon's are pretty scrumptious. Their beauty is in high demand because they're red all the way through, making them a premium for ice cream- and yogurt-makers seeking the deep red color in their products.

One of the most popular and sought-after strawberry varieties is the Hood strawberry. Sweet and large, it's particularly excellent in ice cream. Totem is the most popular strawberry grown in the Northwest, and where we like to pick, Sauvie Island outside of Portland, you'll find farmers growing Hood, Puget Reliance, Honeoye and Tillamook strawberries, to name a few. Each tastes and looks a little different, and it's fun to note the variations.

Strawberries are also fun to grow, and

they'll easily take over a raised bed if you let them. I've been growing them in a hanging container, and they seem to like this environment. If you're looking to grow your own, keep in mind there are three different types of strawberries: June-bearers, everbearers and day-neutrals. The June-bearers will produce one crop a year, while the everbearers produce two. Day-neutrals will continue to produce throughout the season. If you're seeking a flush of big, juicy strawberries, you'll want to go with the June-bearers. If you want to pluck a few for your morning cereal throughout the season, you'd be good to go with the everbearers or day-neutrals.

There's a whole lot of enjoyment to be had with fresh strawberries. We make freezer jam—a simple method of jam-making that doesn't require a hot water bath and preserves the fresh flavor of the berries. Smoothies and milkshakes can't go wrong here, but my new favorite way of enjoying fresh strawberries (other than fresh and plain) is by roasting them in the oven with a mixture of sugar and balsamic vinegar. Roasting deepens the flavor, and the sugar mixes with the balsamic, creat-

ing a mouthwatering sauce perfect for ice cream or frozen yogurt, over shortcake or even for breakfast on top of plain Greek yogurt.



Roasted balsamic strawberries make mornings decadent

Roasted balsamic strawberries

6 cups strawberries, washed and hulled
 ¼ cup sugar
 1 tsp. balsamic vinegar

Preheat the oven to 425 degrees. Toss the strawberries, sugar and vinegar. Spread the mixture out on a rimmed baking sheet (this is going to get a little juicy and you want to hold onto that juice). Bake for 40 minutes. Let cool, then pour them into a container, juicy bits and all. Serve on shortcake, vanilla bean ice cream or for breakfast on top of plain Greek yogurt. ☐

LeAnn Locher is an OSU Extension Master Gardener and gardens in North Portland. Find many more strawberry recipes on her blog, lelono.com.

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