

Diggin' in The Dirt: Strawberry Fields Forever

By Chip Bubl
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Extension Service - Columbia County
The OSU Extension office is closed to face-to-face public contact but you can still reach us!

All of us (faculty and staff) will still be working (mostly out of the office), answering phone calls left on our answering machines, email messages (chip.bubl@oregonstate.edu), writing newspaper columns and newsletters, and working to develop programs that can reach you on-line. We are really committed to helping our communities in any way we can, especially in our areas of subject matter expertise (farming, gardening, forestry, food, food safety, and nutrition, healthy decision-making, and youth education) and any other way we can enrich your life and/or make you safer in these challenging times. Please do not hesitate to contact us! And please, take all steps necessary to ensure that you and your loved ones are safe.

Here are some free classes:

- **Free online OSU vegetable gardening class:** <https://workspace.oregonstate.edu/course/master-gardener-series-vegetable-gardening>
- **Free online beginning OSU/Food Bank vegetable gardening class ("Seed to Supper"):** <https://www.oregonfoodbank.org/our-work/programs/education/gardening/>

Do mulches steal nitrogen?

There is a common misconception that a surface mulch ties-up soil nitrogen. This isn't true.

It is known that when you mix organic matter into the soil, which is a good thing, you can tie-up nitrogen. In that case, you have created a soil composting process. The soil bacteria and fungi that break organic matter down need nitrogen to build up their populations. They scavenge effectively the nitrogen in the soil solution. Your crop plants can't compete as well. So when you work organic matter in, you must add extra nitrogen to feed both the crop and the composting micro-organisms.

But when you put the mulch on the surface, you don't create that same situation. Only the "face" of the mulch in contact with the soil experiences the same rapid colonization. Your crop roots are lower than this zone and are not competing for the same nitrogen. Thus there

is no significant shortage with surface mulching.

That said, you still need to fertilize your crop. The winter rains wash all the nitrogen out of the soil profile and it must be replaced. You can use natural or inorganic nitrogen sources. Just make sure you use enough. A nitrogen-starved plant is light green and generally stunted. I see them all too often.

Transplanting success

Many gardeners use transplants to speed up the growing season. Transplants allow the gardener to space the plants perfectly. Weeds are at a disadvantage when they face the more competitive transplant.

However, transplants often receive quite a shock as they are moved into the garden. First, they have been living in a greenhouse or cold frame. Greenhouse soil temperatures are far greater than the garden soil they will be going into, especially in the spring. You can help the transplant by pre-warming the soil with clear plastic. You can also water with warm water. The plants will also need something to protect them from cool air temperatures, such as a floating row cover.



Arugula transplants from Ohio State University

Transplants also are grown in very well drained media. As they go into the garden, the soil may not be so well drained. A good sized planting hole with plenty of well-decomposed compost mixed in will encourage rapid root establishment.

Transplants should be gently separated. The roots should be spread and the plants placed to the depth of their first true leaves. The roots should never be allowed to dry out.

Water the young transplants with a good nutrient solution. You can

use fish fertilizer or a high phosphorus containing fertilizer like African violet "food." Again, warm water is best. Phosphorus is hard for new plants to get out of cold, wet soils.

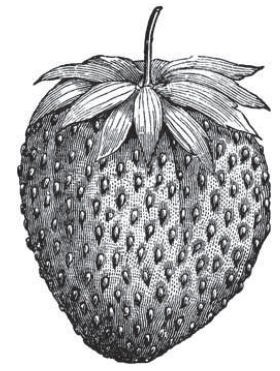
The plants may need to be protected from wind and sun for a few days. In the greenhouse, the humidity is high and the plant may not develop enough of a waxy cuticle. Hardening off the transplant tray outside for a couple of hours a day for several days before putting the plants out will reduce transplant shock.

Strawberry fields forever

While most of the large strawberry operations are no longer active in Columbia County, there are several U-pick locations still going. Additionally, you can grow your own strawberries.

Strawberries are easy to culture. The ground should be reasonably well drained. You should work a modest amount of fertilizer into the soil before planting. After planting, you need to protect the strawberry plants from slugs, weeds, and deer.

You have a choice of "long-day" or June bearing varieties like *Hood*, *Shucksan*, *Benton*, and the like. These varieties give a heavy June-



underside, it isn't going to taste as good as it would if you waited a day.

"Day-neutral" varieties like *Seascape*, *Albion*, and *Tristar* fruit over the entire summer. These are great for fresh eating. *Seascape* and *Albion* have become the mainstays of the fresh market strawberries found after June at farmers markets. *Albion* makes very large fruit but if the summer isn't warm enough, doesn't have the best flavor. *Seascape* yields decently and has fine flavor for a non-June-bearing variety.

May you all be safe and have a wonderful garden year. Hope to be able to see you soon. ~Chip

Free newsletter (what a deal!)

The Oregon State University Extension office in Columbia County publishes a monthly newsletter on gardening and farming topics (called *Country Living*) written/edited by yours truly. All you need to do is ask for it and it will be mailed or emailed to you. Call (503) 397-3462 to be put on the list. Alternatively, you can find it on the web at <http://extension.oregonstate.edu/columbia/> and click on newsletters.

Take excess produce to the food bank, senior centers, or community meals programs. Cash donations to buy food are also greatly appreciated.

The Extension Service offers its programs and materials equally to all people.

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