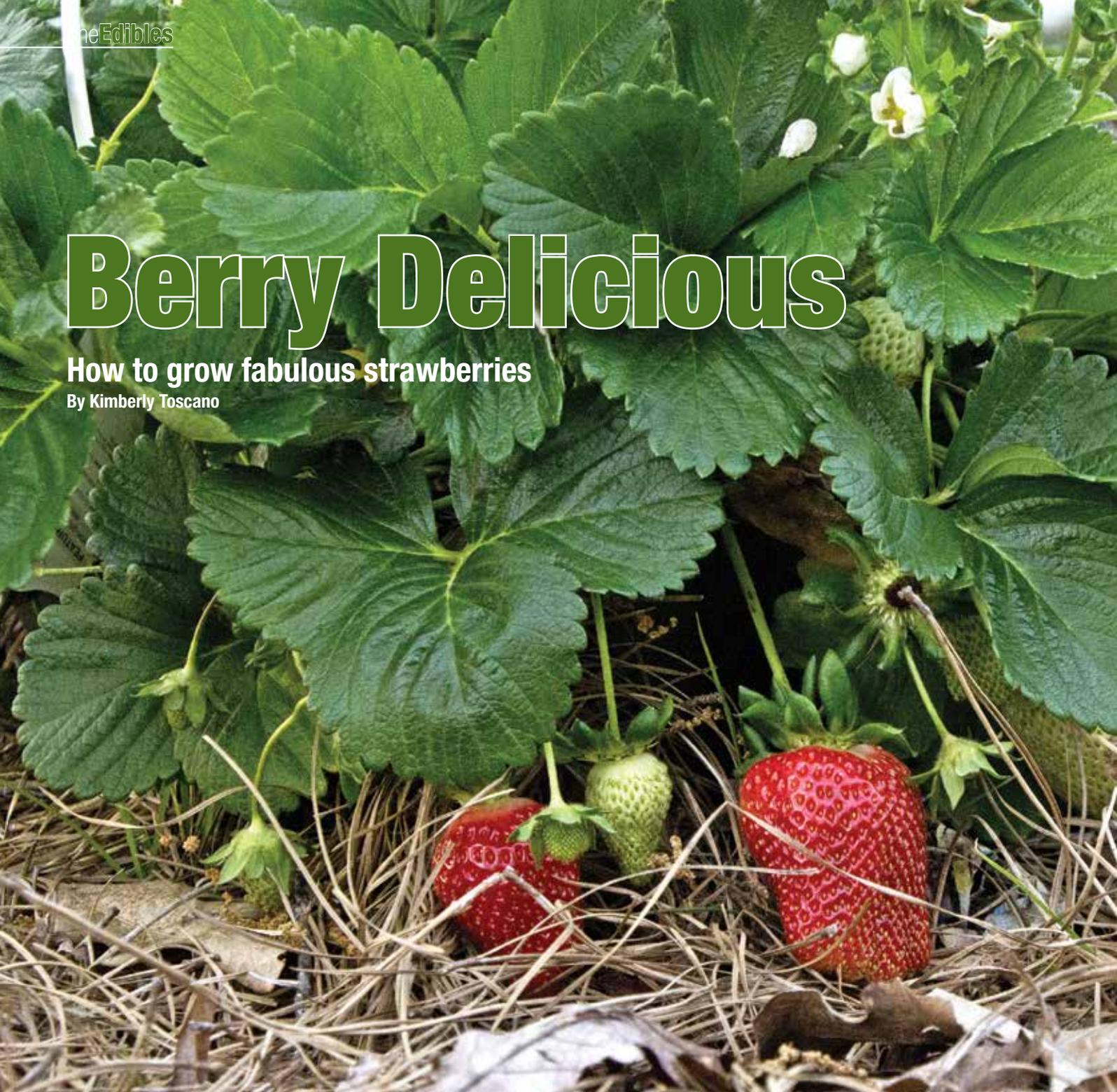


Berry Delicious

How to grow fabulous strawberries

By Kimberly Toscano



With the popularity of edible ornamental gardening, plant breeders are working harder than ever to fuse the edible qualities of our favorite fruits with ornamental characteristics. The abundance of improved ornamental fruit varieties in recent years has been stunning. In the world of strawberries we see new flower colors, larger blossoms, and compact plant forms

making plants ever more appealing as ground covers or spilling out of containers.

From an ornamental standpoint, the biggest development in strawberry breeding has been the selection of pink and rose-colored blossoms. Ornamental strawberries are primarily everbearing or day-neutral, dazzling with blooms and fruit all summer long. But buyer beware, some of these

cultivars are more fruitful than others due to the breeding methods used to develop colorful blooms.

Among the least fruitful are plants developed through intergeneric crosses between strawberry (*Fragaria* sp.) and a cinquefoil (*Comarum* sp.) including the varieties 'Pink Panda' (a.k.a. 'Frel') and 'Lipstick'. Both varieties produce edible fruits, but in far fewer numbers than traditional

strawberries. Where they lack in fruitfulness, these varieties make up for in beauty. The benefits of this breeding line are the compact plant form and large pink flowers, making plants extremely showy. Of the two varieties, 'Lipstick' has better pest resistance.

Another compact strawberry is 'Tristan' (*Fragaria x ananassa*). Produced through traditional breeding, 'Tristan' is quite fruitful and has a beautiful form. Large, magenta pink blooms stand on chartreuse stems above dark green foliage before giving way to bright red berries that hang down on long stems. Fruits are abundant and sweet. Lovely in a container or hanging basket, 'Tristan' produces few runners, making it quite tidy for patio settings.

I have to admit, I love plants (and foods) that share my last name. You bet I grew 'Nero di Toscana' just for its namesake. So when I saw 'Toscana' strawberry I was a bit excited. With large blossoms in a vivid shade of rose, this is one beautiful strawberry. 'Toscana' is also a heavy fruiter, producing sweet 1-1½-inch berries. Unlike 'Tristan', this variety produces runners, so give it some space or a tall planter to appreciate the trailing habit.

With bubblegum pink blossoms, 'Roseberry' strawberry from Canadian breeders has several unique traits. Bred for fruit production, 'Roseberry' is unique in that plants produce flowers and fruits on stolons or runners even before they set root. Imagine a hanging basket draped in pink blossoms and red fruits all summer long. While 'Roseberry' will perform well in the ground, it will dazzle in containers.

Another line bred for both fruiting and ornamental characteristics is the Berries Galore series. With large-flowered pink and rose varieties, these plants were bred with the patio garden in mind. Berries are sweet and dark red, produced over a long season.

While these new introductions are beautiful, they have not yet been fully tested against Oklahoma's intense heat. As I experiment with these little beauties, I am not yet ready to give up the incredibly tough but white-



Strawberries ripen earlier than other fruits and are the perfect fresh from the garden treat.



Utilizing drip irrigation in strawberry beds can help limit the incidence of disease.



▲ Strawberry plants are prone to a number of foliage and fruit diseases. Keep resistance in mind when selecting varieties for the garden.

Top photo: The ornamental strawberry variety 'Rainbow Treasure' produces blossoms in three colors: white, light pink and dark pink. Interestingly, the light pink flowers are much larger than the other colors.

Fall Maintenance

Strawberry plants benefit from a winter covering of straw or similar mulch to protect plant crowns from freeze and thaw cycles. Freezing and thawing of the soil can push plants out of the ground, particularly shallow-rooted plants like strawberries. Loosely cover plants with 3-4 inches of mulch after several hard frosts, usually between late November and early December. Do not cover plants too early as they need to harden off enough to sustain winter temperatures. Remove mulch in mid-March, as soon as new growth begins. At this time the mulch can be used to suppress weeds between plants.

flowered cultivar 'Eversweet'. This everbearing variety was developed for Southern gardeners, thriving in heat and humidity. I have never grown a more productive variety. Given adequate water, plants will continue to set fruit in 100 F weather with no loss of quality. Now there is a strawberry for Oklahoma! And you do not have to give up flavor for toughness. Fruits are juicy sweet and quite large.

All of these varieties are everbearing or day-neutral, producing fruit throughout the season. In general, plants will produce a large flush of berries in early summer, followed by smaller crops every few weeks throughout the summer until frost. For gardeners who want to put a crop of berries in the freezer or to make jam, plant everbearing varieties along with June-bearing varieties. This provides a large crop for processing, followed by berries for fresh eating all summer long.

There is no shortage of suppliers for ornamental strawberries. Varieties can be purchased as seed or crowns. White Flower Farm and Burpee Home Gardens offer the Berries Galore series. Park Seed offers plants of 'Tristan' and 'Eversweet'. 'Toscana' seeds are available from Burpee and Stokes Seeds. 'Roseberry' is not yet widely available, but is a variety to watch for in the future.

Home gardeners do not often grow strawberries from seed. Two options are available. Sow seeds directly into the garden in late fall or early spring, making sure adequate moisture is available throughout the winter. When sowing outdoors, set seeds at a depth of three times the seed width. The better method is to sow seeds indoors at a temperature between 68-72 F. Seeds will take up to 30 days to germinate. Transplant after at least two sets of true leaves have formed, taking care not to damage roots.✂

Kimberly Toscano blends her formal training in horticulture and entomology with her passion for design to educate and inspire gardeners. She shares her love of gardening, culture, design and the natural world through guided travel experiences. Learn more at www.kimtoscano.com.