

## Strawberry Season

Bill Ward II

It is strawberry season! Seed and plant companies have been mailing bareroot plants for weeks while local farm and garden centers are selling transplants quicker than you can say strawberry pie. Home and market gardeners with established plantings will soon be picking these sweet early summer treats. Grown in pots, raised beds, buckets, barrels, or old boots, every home has a spot for a strawberry plant. Adaptable and delicious, they are the most widely grown small fruit in the country. In honor of strawberries and the official start of the farmers market season, UT/TSU Extension kicked off the Grow JoCo Kids program on May 7<sup>th</sup> at the Johnson County Farmers Market.

Participants aged 18 months to 18 years old planted donated vegetable seeds and received a strawberry plant to take home! The variety our junior gardeners received was San Andreas, an everbearing type. Fruiting twice a year, everbearing varieties produce less fruit at one time, but do so over a longer season making them an excellent choice for fresh eating. The first flush of blooms should be removed but later blossoms can be allowed to fruit. With some TLC, Grow JoCo kids will be enjoying strawberries by late summer.

However, with only a single plant there may not be enough to go around. Americans consume 8 pounds of strawberries annually and as each plant only produces one-half to one pound per season investing in a small strawberry patch may mitigate future family feuds. For a family of four, expect 25 plants to produce 25-40 pounds yearly over the course of their 3-4-year lifespan.

If shelves loaded with jam and cobblers with cream are dancing through your dreams you may want to consider June-bearing varieties. June-bearers boast heavier production and a shorter harvest window. Name aside, June-bearing strawberries often ripen in May on buds set the previous fall. However, one of a gardener's most heart-wrenching spring tasks is removing blooms during a plant's first season in order to encourage plant growth and runner establishment. June-bearers should be planted 18-24" apart with 36-40" rows allowing runners to fill in the empty space. By the end of the summer berry rows should be 18-24" wide with plants 6-8" apart. Everbearing types are solo artists planted 8-12" apart in 30-36" rows, removing runners throughout the summer.

A productive strawberry patch requires work and diligence as weeds, disease, and insects can inflict serious damage to your crop while birds steal you blind. But it's worth it. Contact UT/TSU Extension if you have any questions on growing strawberries and don't forget the Grow JoCo Kids program at the Johnson County Farmer's Market. Oh, and forget the worm, it's the early bird that gets the strawberry.