



Growing Small Fruits at Home

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Michigan-grown small fruits harvest begins in mid-June with strawberries and ends in September to October with grapes and raspberries.

People purchase locally grown small fruits such as strawberries, raspberries, blueberries and grapes because of their superior flavor and freshness. Sometimes the joy of tasting these delights inspires home gardeners to try growing small fruits. If you are considering raising these fruits, spend some time planning the project to improve your chances of success.

The first consideration is the site. A minimum of eight hours of direct sunlight is required to grow top-quality fruits. Light-textured soils such as sandy loams are ideal, but heavier soils containing some clay can be suitable as long as they drain well. Standing water on the surface or in the planting hole is unacceptable. The pH, which is a measure of the acidity or alkalinity of the soil, is also important. Most small fruits grow well with a pH between 6 and 7; the exception is blueberries, which prefer the pH 4-5 range.



A source of clean water for irrigation is also a priority. Your plantings will need irrigation during establishment and fruit production. In certain cases, watering will be needed for frost protection.

Most people do not consider protecting their investment from various animals such as deer, rabbits and birds. Deer will browse strawberry

plants and may trim the new growth on blueberries. Rabbits will cut down raspberry canes. Birds love to eat blueberries, and robins will eat holes in strawberries. Barriers such as netting and fences will be necessary to preserve your produce.

Small fruit ripening periods:

Strawberries: *mid-June to July*

Raspberries: *July; everbearing late August to October*

Blackberries: *August to mid-September*

Blueberries: *Mid-July to mid-September*

Grapes: *September to mid-October*

Lawn or garden questions?

Visit migarden.msu.edu.
Call toll-free 1-888-678-3464.

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A number of plant purchasing options are available. One is to buy from local garden centers; another is ordering from catalogs or online. Buying locally has its advantages. You can examine the plants before purchasing, and, in the case of blueberries, the best nurseries will have larger plants available than you can get by mail order. One disadvantage is that the price of locally purchased raspberries tends to be higher because they are usually sold as individual plants instead of quantities that contain multiple plants, also called canes. Catalog companies that specialize in fruits offer a greater selection of cultivars than you'll find locally. Selections can be made on the basis of flavor, fruit size, yield potential, disease resistance, age of the plants and qualities for processing.

If you want to grow recently released varieties, order early. If possible, submit your order six months before you plan to plant. This will greatly improve the chance that the plants will be in stock, especially the new varieties. When placing the order, remember to provide information on when the plants should be shipped; otherwise, the company will send the order when the folks there think it is appropriate for your area.

When the plants arrive, open the package immediately and examine everything. Moisten the roots of plants not in pots and store them in the shade until planting time. If you are not satisfied with the condition of the plants, send a note to the company. If the plants die later, notifying the company early on should make getting a refund less difficult.

If weather conditions are not good for planting, place bare-root plants in pots as soon as possible. This will buy some time until the weather is more favorable.

Before planting, test the soil to determine what nutrients are required for optimal growth. In the fall before planting, eliminate all perennial weeds, especially grasses. This can be done by applying Roundup or other products containing glyphosate on a sunny day when the temperatures reach the 60s, or covering the ground with 6 mil thick black plastic. Leave the plastic in place for four to six weeks during warmer weather, up to 10 weeks during cooler fall or winter weather. In the spring, plant as soon as the soil is dry enough to be worked. This is usually in May.

Per capita consumption of **strawberries** totaled 8.7 pounds in 2009

(Agricultural Marketing Resource Center – Commodity)

Blueberry consumption in the United States increased to an estimated 31.4 ounces per person in 2009

(Blueberry News 2010)

For additional information on small fruit management, visit the Gardening in Michigan Web site: <http://migarden.msu.edu/>.

Resources

Online MSU Extension horticulture education classes: <http://ce.ingham.org/Horticulture/OnlineClasses.aspx>:

- Growing Strawberries in the Home Garden.
- Growing Raspberries and Blackberries in the Home Garden.
- Growing Blueberries in the Home Garden.

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