

# Quacking From Rappahannock

May 2011

## All About Strawberries

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The different kinds, how to grow them, when to harvest, and a few recipes.



## Upcoming Classes & Workshops & Events

- (Almost) Monthly Cooking Class: 4-course seasonal menu. [Un Dimanche a La Campagne/ Sunday in the Country](#), Washington, VA, generally on the first Sunday afternoon of the month. Next class is Sunday June 5, 3:30-7:30 PM. Take one or several classes.
- [Canning & jam making workshops](#) starting in early July (July 6) through October. If you are interested, **it's not too early to register**—several students have done so already! Topics include: Jam, tomatoes, peaches, pickles, apples, pears etc
- [Flavor Magazine Benefit Party](#) for Rappahannock Food Pantry is May 14. We will be spit-roasting a whole lamb just like last year. And just like last year, there will be plenty of terrific local food & wine in a gorgeous setting. Get your ticket now.

Questions or comments? Send me an [e-mail!](#)

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## Strawberries are for ever.. sometimes

The strawberry holds a very special place in my heart: it is the first fruit of the year. Rhubarb - while often eaten in deserts is not botanically speaking a fruit - and how many people will eat a basket of raw rhubarb? Mmm? Yes, that what I **thought... So after months of** canned or frozen fruit - and the odd tropical purchased at the store - I welcome enthusiastically fresh strawberries from the garden. They arrive in May.

Strawberry is a relatively new comer - especially when compared to the antique apples, quinces, grapes or figs, fruit that are known to have been cultivated for thousands of years. Probably not introduced in European gardens until the late Middle Ages, strawberry was thought as a delicacy from the fields and the woods.

The garden strawberry as we know it today has a fascinating history. When the Europeans came to the Americas, they found several species strawberries, different from the ones they knew - mostly the Alpine strawberry (*Fragaria vesca*) and the wood strawberry (*F. moschata*). Enthusiastic reports of wild strawberry fields are rather amusing to read - what with **"Virgin Indian maidens" picking** strawberries in idyllic settings and the like. On the North American Eastern Seaboard, they found the Virginia strawberry (*F. virginiana*) which has a

lovely clear red color, a firm texture, is powerfully fragrant and extremely vigorous. On the West Coast (both of North & South America), they found the Chilean strawberry (*F. chiloensis*) remarkable mostly because of its very large fruit.

Plants of the two American strawberries were sent to Europe of course. And when grown together, they crossed spontaneously. People noticed the beautiful, fragrant and highly flavorful fruit resulting when the Chilean strawberries and the Virginia strawberries are grown next to one another. For example in the Brest botanical garden (in French Brittany) in 1740 as well as in the Dutch garden of George Clifford near Haarlem. From those spontaneous crosses the *Fragaria x ananassa*, the ancestor of our garden strawberries, was born: a fat juicy, vividly red and nicely perfumed hybrid berry on a vigorous plant combining the best of the North and South American strawberries (or Eastern and Western North America if you prefer)

In my garden, I grow Virginia strawberries, Alpine strawberries (just a few), and 3 kinds of **garden strawberries: 'Tristar' and 'Eversweet' two day-neutral** garden strawberries as well as **'Earlyglow'**. They each are appealing for different reasons.

The Alpine strawberry is incredibly fragrant but also incredi-

bly fragile - so fragile that it literally melts away when you wash it and does not keep very long (best to eat it straight from the garden); it produces throughout the summer - albeit not that much at any one time, does not run but clumps, and is also easy to propagate by seeds. It works prettily to edge beds - including flowerbed - and it will tolerate some shade. In my experience, in Virginia, it actually wants afternoon shade to do well.

The Virginia strawberry is



*Virginia strawberry exuberantly blooming in mid-late April.*

hardy and vigorous. Yes, it does run - it seems to enjoy both marathon and sprinting in fact - quite a feat. The 20 or so plants that were given to me last year now solidly cover an area 3 feet

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One can't grow enough strawberries. From top left, scarlet Virginia strawberry, fragile Alpine strawberry, and water deprived (2010 was dry! therefore small) garden strawberry 'Tristar'



From top to bottom: 'Tristar' garden strawberry, Virginia strawberry and Alpine strawberry.

by 8 feet ... and growing. Obviously a good ground cover. I was visiting an apple orchard recently, and throughout the orchard, lots and lots of blooming Virginia strawberries were dotting the grass - reminding me that in many past writers describe strawberry growing in the meadows. Virginia strawberries obviously can hold their own against grass! They produce one early abundant crop of delicious firm small scarlet berries with an incomparable flavor.

Many people wrinkle their nose when "wild strawberry" is mentioned. They only have had experience with the [false strawberry](#) (actually a potentilla) - which has no taste - none, whatsoever. How to tell them apart? False strawberry flowers are yellow (Virginia's white with a yellow center). False strawberry seeds are raised, Virginia depressed. False strawberries look up, while real strawberries look down. False strawberries are almost perfectly spherical; Virginia strawberries tend to be more elongated. So if you have never tasted a Virginia strawberry, you do not know what you are missing.

Garden strawberries are further divided into 3 groups:

- the June strawberries are so named because they crop for a few weeks from May through June depending on the cultivar. This is the garden strawberry most people are familiar with: one big crop **and you are done until next year.** 'Earlyglow' is a June strawberry. June strawberries are planted in the spring and not harvested until the spring of the following year. Yes, one year to wait. And then - assuming good cultivation practices - be ready to be out there harvesting every day for a few weeks. And I mean every day!
- Then you have "ever-bearing" strawberries - a total misnomer, if you ask me. They also crop **around June and then again in the fall. That's NOT "everbearing", but "bi-bearing" or "re-bearing"** - rather like those irises that bloom in the spring and in the fall and are called "re-bloomer". But "ever-bearing" sounds so much nicer, doesn't it! Ever-bearing strawberries include 'Bolero' and 'Calypso'.

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*'Tristar' - October 2009*

- The third group is the most recent ones, first developed **in the 1980's: the day-neutral strawberries** that flower (and fruit) regardless of how long the days and nights are - as long as the temperatures remain above freezing and are oppressively high. All other garden strawberries (and the Virginia strawberries) bloom only if the night are longer **than the days**. **'Tristar'**, a day neutral strawberry developed at the University of Maryland, produces a tasty crop throughout the entire growing season from spring to frost, perfect for those who want a few quarts every weeks for many weeks - not two bushel over 4 weeks! **'Tristar' also freezes well.** I just wash them briefly if they are gritty, let them dry on a towel, then hull them and toss them in a freezer bag. I just planted **'Eversweet'** another day-neutral in early April so I **don't know yet how it will perform for me.** But unlike the June strawberries, I will be able to harvest some **'Eversweet'** in late summer this year - another big advantage to the day-neutrals.

Some catalogs use "ever-bearer" and "day-neutral" interchangeably. They are not the same: "everbearer" are still affected by the day-length: they re-bloom in the fall when the nights are longer than the day. If the weather remains mild (and it can be a big if depending where you garden), you may expect a fall crop 4 to 6 weeks later. Day-neutrals are not affected by day-length at all, although they will slow down if it gets really hot (in my experience over 95F) and if you do not provide them the water they want.

How to plant strawberries.



*A bed of 'Tristar'*

Strawberries are most commonly sold as bareroot plants. One orders them through the mail in the winter and they arrive in early April. Or they show up at various garden centers in early April. A typical bundle has 25 plants and cost roughly \$10 - and does look like much! They should be planted as soon as possible (which is why I prefer mail order - it can be difficult to know how long the plants have been sitting on the shelf at a garden center). If you cannot plant right away, refrigerate the plants.

The planting site should be in full sun with a well drained soil rich in organic matter - you cannot give strawberries enough compost. In our area, you should really try to plant bareroot plants by April 15. I soak my plants roots for a few hours to rehydrate them (but don't do that for too long as strawberry plants can rot if held too long in water). For each plant, I dig a small hole, put a handful of soil at the bottom to form a cone, and sit the plant on this cone, spreading the roots evenly. I then gently but firmly push back the rest of the soil on top of the roots and all around the collar of the plant, letting the little tiny leaves and growing buds above ground. Plant all your plants at once, ideally 18 inches. Then water well.

Some garden centers sell potted strawberries. While they are - understandably - more expensive, you can plant them any time.

Remove all the blossoms from the June strawberries (they only bloom in April/May) and all the blossom of the day-neutrals through the end of June. You want them to make roots first. Let the day-neutral plants blossom from July on, and you may expect a pleasant harvest in late summer until frost the first year. Mulch. Remove the runners during the first season to have larger berries. Mulch. Water your plants well especially if the summer is dry. Mulch.

From our 25 initial plants of **'Tristar'**, I pick a quart or two

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every a week from June through September, and then some in October and November. I occasionally thin the plants, discarding the weaker and older ones, especially in March before the **new year's growth starts**.

While strawberries can be subject to diseases and insect damages, you can avoid a lot of issues by planting them well apart for good air circulation, giving the plants a sunny site with a rich well drained soil and mulching consistently. Birds love strawberries and I do have to net them to protect them.

We eat them fresh, whole, in coulis/chilled soups, on tarts. I make liqueur, jam, sorbet & ice-cream. I freeze quantities of them; while the texture of a whole frozen and thawed strawberry is unpleasant, frozen strawberries can be puréed for sauce, sorbet & ice-cream in the off-season, cooked for sauce, compote or jam, or thrown in the blender with yogurt to make smoothie.

I would not do without strawberry plants in my garden.

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### *TOMATOES - Cont'd*

ing like crazy: shredded leaves, dry grass clippings, more compost, and I keep watering, wetting the leaves too - early in the morning - with diluted seaweed or fish emulsion. I stop using foliage fertilization when I see tiny fruit forming.

**It's a lot of work at planting but it is worth it.**

## The Right Way To Plant Tomatoes

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Early May is the traditional time to plant tomatoes in our area. Oh, I know, some years (like this year) it can be done in late April, but one has to be ready to rush with blanket or agrofabric to protect the plants should frost threaten. Which happens. Often.

It is generally recommended not to transplant seedlings too deep or you would kill it. Of course, there are always exceptions: cabbage and broccoli should be planted to their first set of leaves for example. Tomato is also an **exception to the rule... and it can be planted even deeper**. In fact, the deeper the better, because new roots will form along the buried stem allowing the plant to take up more nutrients, better access to moisture, and a better anchoring, better access to moisture - all meaning better growth and more or bigger fruit.

I plant tomatoes in full sun in garden soil amended deeply with lots of compost & composted manure.

My smaller tomato plants are about 10 to 12 inches tall when I **plant them (they've been up-potted at least twice)**. I make a hole deep enough to bury the entire plant, mounding the soil all around the hole. I put a very big handful of compost and a small one of dolomitic lime at the bottom of the hole (or 3 or 4 crushed eggshells). The dolomitic lime or the eggshell provides calcium which helps ward off blossom end

rot. I remove the seedling from its spot, gently teasing the roots out, set it at the bottom of the hole. I then backfill the hole 2/3 full with pure compost. Only the top of the tomato plant is unburied and it is roughly even with the top of the hole. I water well using diluted seaweed or fish emulsion. It will take a few weeks for the plant to show growth, but it is making roots. Then it starts shooting up - almost all of a sudden. As the plant grows, I push back into the hole the soil that I had excavated and mounded, again encouraging the tomato to make more roots.

I do the same with my larger plants that were started earlier and up-potted 3 or 4 times, except that I keep the hole about a foot deep, so the top of the tomato is above the ground.

I set my indeterminate tomatoes (those that grow very large, vine like and keep producing until frost kills them) in reinforced concrete mesh cages, 3 feet apart. Determinate tomatoes that grow smaller and produce a determinate amount of flowers and fruit before expiring can be planted closer (2 feet apart) and use the vaguely conical cages **sold in the trade as "tomato cages"** (indeterminate tomatoes are way too large for those small cages and will simply crush them).

By the end of May I start mulch-

## The Cook & the Gardener: Strawberry Coconut Gelato



As its botanical name "**fragaria**" indicates strawberries are fragrant - incredibly so when ripe, yet acutely disappointing when eaten under ripe. And guess what, they do not get any sweeter once they are picked, only

softer and sometimes redder.

If you grow them or go to a pick-your own berry batch, it's easy enough to pick them at their peak of flavor. Otherwise check that the green caps look fresh. The berries should be a shiny red with no white area by the cap, no soft spots and no mold (duh!)! Most importantly, let your nose be your guide: the berries should smell overwhelmingly of ... **strawberries, a strong heady perfume** that is impossible to ignore - and forget.

I love frozen concoctions and I make them often. Sorbet, sherbet, gelato, French-style ice-cream, Philadelphia-style ice-cream, frozen yogurt, semi-freddo... **When I want something which tastes rich, has a creamy texture and a great mouth feel taste without dairy, I reach for coconut milk (not coconut cream). Yes, it does bring a coconut flavor to the recipe (not a problem, I love coconut), but it's not overwhelming - especially if your fruit of choice is fully ripe and flavorful. Using coconut milk saves about 1000 calories (yes one thousand) compared to using 2 cups of heavy whipping cream... If 1 quart is 8 servings, that's - gulp! - 125 calories less per servings...**

*Note: Warning about coconut milk: check the ingredient list. On the cheaper cans, the label says "coconut milk" but the ingredient list may well be*

*something like: water, coconut extract & preservatives. You want to buy something where the ingredient list is "coconut milk".*

YIELDS ABOUT 1 QUART

- 1 can (about 14 fl oz) coconut milk (see note)
- $\frac{3}{4}$  cup sugar
- 1 heaping quart very ripe strawberries, cleaned and hulled

Pour the content of the coconut milk can in a sauce pan (it may be partially solidified) and heat up gently, stirring until the solids are dissolved, the milk is smooth and warm. Add sugar, stir until dissolved. Remove from heat.

Purée strawberry in blender until very smooth. Measure 2 cups, add to a non reactive sauce pan with sugar and heat slowly, stirring until the sugar has dissolved completely. Chill thoroughly up to overnight in the fridge. Gently whisk in the cream until completely incorporated.

Process in your ice-cream maker following manufacturers' instructions. **Transfer to a freezer safe container for firming up - at least 2 hours.**

You can use the remaining purée to make fresh strawberry sauce, or you can adjust the quantities of coconut milk and sugar to make more ice-cream.

A ripe strawberry needs not much more than a willing eater. But if you have excess and need some ideas of things to with them, take a look at those other posts:

- [Strawberry compote and homemade yogurt](#)
- [Berry Smoothie](#)
- [Minty Strawberry Sorbet](#)
- [Homemade Lemon-Verbena Strawberry Liqueur](#)
- [Berry & Peach Jubilee](#)
- [Honey Rhubarb Frozen Yogurt with Chilled Strawberry Soup](#)

## Seasonal Menu Ideas For May

### Two Course

#### Vegetarian

Mushroom Risotto/ Wilted Spinach  
Dry Apricot & Yogurt Parfait

#### Omnivore

Green Mix Salad with Duck-fat Fried Potatoes &  
Fresh Farm Eggs  
Honey Rhubarb Frozen Yogurt with Chilled Straw-  
berry Soup



### Three Course

#### Vegetarian

Radishes with Sea Salt, Butter and Baguette Slices  
Lentil & Quinoa with Wilted Spinach  
Baked Honey Custard with Fresh Strawberries

#### Omnivore

Sorrel Vichyssoise (Chilled Sorrel & Leek Soup)  
Tuna with Lemon Caper Butter Sauce/ Roasted As-  
paragus  
Lemon & Rosemary Gelato

### Four Course

#### Vegetarian

Herbed Farm Cheese Dip with Baby Carrots  
Arugula & Shaved Fennel Salad  
Parpadelles with Creamy Mushroom Sauce  
Wine-marinated Strawberries & Rosemary Butter  
Cookies

#### Omnivore

Asparagus tartelettes  
Watercress Salad  
Lamb Sausage / Polenta / Wilted Garlicky Mixed  
Cooking Greens  
Ginger Ice-Cream

### Five Course

#### Vegetarian

Borsht Soup  
Mushroom & Onion Confit Pizza  
Simple Green Salad  
Blue Cheese & Quince Paste  
Strawberry Frozen Yogurt

#### Omnivore

Pork Rilletes with Country Bread and Pickles  
Multicolor Beet Salad  
Rabbit in Mustard Sauce/ Sautéed Mushrooms  
Mixed Green Salad  
Lemon Tart



### Brunch Ideas

- Asparagus Scrambled Eggs
- Swiss chard & Ham Strata
- Baked Brie with Green Salad
- Upside down Rhubarb Cake
- Waffles with Fresh Strawberries
- French Toast with Caramelized Rhubarb
- Yogurt & Strawberry Parfait
- Crepes with Almond Cream & Caramelized Ma-  
ple Apples
- Super Easy Smoothies

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# Laughing Duck Gardens & Cookery At A Glance

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## Special Event & Week-end Cookery:

- In-home catering for a special dinner, brunch or lunch, high tea, hors d'oeuvres and more;
- Picnic baskets & tailgate parties;
- In-home catering for small weddings (up to 75 guests), wedding rehearsals, anniversaries, engagement, birthdays, showers etc at your home or your vacation rental home;
- Lamb Roasts & Pig Roasts;
- Week-end/vacation cookery packages that let you fully enjoy activities in the country and come home to incredible cooked-from-scratch meals, with many locally sourced ingredients.

## Personal Chef Services For Every Day Cookery

- Personal Chef Services perfect for busy families, singles or couples: the chef plans, shops, cooks and packages meals tailored to your preferences and diet (and cleans up the kitchen, of course). Available as one-time service or as a subscription.
- A La Carte cookery services (hourly) also available.

## Cooking Instruction

- Workshops throughout the year show you that cooking can be fun, unfussy and rewarding - and a money saver. Topics are varied: from soup making to canning, from ice-cream making to roasting duck, from spice appreciation to cooking a feast, there is something for everybody! The newest series of classes "Un Dimanche A La Campagne/ Sunday in the Country" shows how to prepare a seasonal ever changing 4-course menu.
- Canning & jam making workshops in summer & fall
- Custom personal/private cookery lessons for very focused one-on-one sessions or for a group of friends. They make a great birthday present.

**Kitchen Garden & Cookery Talks:** Sylvie is available for speaking to your group about food gardening or cooking. Or for demonstrations.

**Gift certificates** are available for classes, dinner or other services.

**Writing:** Sylvie shares her experience about growing herbs, vegetables, fruit & edible flowers, foraging, and cooking locally and from the garden in her blog "[Rappahannock Cook & Kitchen Gardener](#)" as well as in the Seasonal Table Column of [Flavor Magazine](#).

**Kitchen Garden Coach:** Coaching Services are perfect for somebody who is willing to do the work but need guidance or advice, whether once, occasionally or on a regular basis. Whether your questions have to do with growing, harvesting or cooking, or just how to start, Sylvie can help.



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