

Strawberries: "Arcadian dainties with a true paradisiacal flavor"

In 1767, when Jefferson harvested strawberries from his garden at Shadwell, he noted in the Garden Book that "100 fill half a pint," a remarkable testament to the petite berries and the humble state of the garden strawberry in the eighteenth century. Jefferson knew this "Arcadian dainty" in the infant stage of its development; as the indigenous species of three continents -- the Scarlet (*Fragaria virginiana*) from North America and the Chili (*F. chiloensis*) from the Pacific coasts of North and South America -- were first being selected and accidentally hybridized into the strawberry we know today, *Fragaria x ananassa*. (*Fragaria* from the fruit's fragrance; *ananassa* from the berry's resemblance to the shape, aroma, and flavor of the pineapple, *Ananas comosus*.) Because of the quantity of references in his Garden Book, the strawberry ranks with the peach, apple, grape -- perhaps the cherry and fig -- as one of Jefferson's favorite fruits. Cultivated strawberries abounded at Monticello at a time when they were surprisingly infrequent in Virginia kitchen gardens. Jefferson even proposed planting fields of the everbearing but small fruiting Alpine strawberry. He provided friends strawberries from his garden, forwarded surplus plants to Poplar Forest, and occasionally remarked that his berries survived the vagaries of spring weather when other fruits perished -- all indications of success. With his typical, unabated zeal for the latest horticultural novelty, Jefferson repeatedly requested the newest strawberries from Philadelphia nurseryman John Bartram, Jr., and Bernard McMahon (<https://www.monticello.org/site/house-and-gardens/bernard-mcmahon-pioneer-american-gardener>). The range of species Jefferson eventually planted at Monticello reflected the diverse bloodlines that formed one of the most interesting chapters in North American horticulture.

Eight years before Jefferson harvested his petite Shadwell berries, in the seventh edition of *The Gardener's Dictionary*, 1759, Philip Miller described a large fruiting strawberry he had obtained from George Clifford, director of the Netherlands East India Company and owner of a respected botanical garden near Haarlem. The question of the identity of "Miller's strawberry" sparked a fierce debate that persisted for two centuries, but most horticultural taxonomists now concur that it was a cross between the flavorful, fragrant, yet comparatively small *F. virginiana* and the large-berried *F. chiloensis*, which had been introduced into France from the Pacific coast of Chile in 1714 by Amedée François Frézier. The two species were growing side by side in Clifford's Dutch garden when the accidental hybridization occurred. Antoine Duchesne, author of the landmark work, *Histoire Naturelle des Fraisières*, 1766, correctly identified Miller's strawberry as a chance hybrid,



and named it the "Pine" (short for pineapple) or *Fragaria ananassa*. Duchesne was the first to argue that a new race of fruit could arise by the crossing of two species, in this case *F. chiloensis* and *F. virginiana*, while Philip Miller has been credited with discovering the progenitor of the modern strawberry, the Pine -- both monumental events in the history of horticulture. No longer an "Arcadian dainty" but a fat, juicy, vividly red and delicately perfumed fruit the size of a small plum, the genetic potential of the new Pine strawberry seemed limitless. Curiously, the Pine reflected a new and unique internationalism in garden plants: species from two continents, North and South America, were hybridized accidentally in a third, Europe.

Like the naturalized peach or native grape, the Scarlet or Virginia strawberry, "the softest and juiciest of all the species" according to Duchesne, provided still another deliciously sensuous course for the Native American table of fruit. Although Canadian-collected *F. virginiana* were probably grown earlier in French botanical garden, Thomas Hariot, the scientific adviser and narrator for the Sir Walter Raleigh expedition in 1585, may have been the first to relay the Virginia strawberry, "as good and as great as those which we have in our English gardens," to England. It was soon described as the "greene strawberrie" (partly because of abbreviated ripening) by John Gerard in 1597 and illustrated in European herbals such as Basilius Besler's *Hortus Eystettensis* in 1613. The Large Early Scarlet, or simply Scarlet, a selected large-berried form of *Fragaria virginiana*, was introduced into European gardens by 1613 and renewed interest in the quality of the New World strawberry.

Wild strawberries thrived with the conquest and settlement of North America: as a pioneer species when Indians or Europeans cleared or burned the forests, or when exhausted tobacco fields were abandoned. Richard Peters reported on an 800-acre strawberry garden, "in most extraordinary profusion," that emerged following the burning of a pine forest outside Philadelphia in the late eighteenth century: "The people of the towns . . . from distances of more than 20 miles were accustomed to gather and carry off these strawberries, in quantities almost incredible."

William Bartram often alluded to natural "strawberry beds" and strawberry fields that dyed the legs and feet of his horses in his botanical journeys through the southeast in 1776. In one such "Elysian field" in western North Carolina, Bartram, in perhaps the most sensuously lyrical passage of his **Travels**, encountered "companies of young, innocent Cherokee virgins, some busily gathering the rich fragrant fruit, others having already filled their baskets, lay reclined under the shade of floriferous and fragrant native bowers of Magnolia, Azalea, Philadelphus, perfumed Calycanthus, sweet Yellow Jessamine and cerulian *Glycine frutescens*, disclosing their beauties to the fluttering breeze, and bathing their limbs in the cool fleeting stream; whilst other parties, more gay and libertine, were yet collecting strawberries or wantonly chasing their companions, tantalizing them,

staining their lips and cheeks with the rich fruit." Wild strawberries are still abundant in grasslands, open woods, and old orchards throughout eastern North America, but it would be difficult to find spontaneous strawberry gardens as opulent as those depicted by Bartram.

Writers differed in their reports on how extensively the strawberry was cultivated before the Revolution. Robert Beverley noted strawberries "as delicious as any in the World, and growing almost every where in the Woods, and Fields. They are eaten almost by all Creatures; and yet are so plentiful, that very few Persons take care to transplant them, but can find enough to fill their baskets . . . in the deserted old Fields." The cultivation of native berries was limited because, while the size of Virginia strawberries is usually increased when brought into the garden, the flavor of those harvested from forests and fields is often considered superior; in the same way that wild game has a stronger and more vivid taste than its domesticated cousins. Allusions to garden strawberries were relatively infrequent in the diaries and records of Jefferson's contemporaries.

As early as the 1600s New England's Roger Williams marveled at the quantity of wild strawberries cultivated in Native American gardens: "I have many times seen as many as would fill a good ship." Nonetheless, plants were introduced into kitchen gardens by Virginia gardeners who considered the strawberry a prestigious kitchen garden item and by gardeners in towns without access to "strawberry fields." Directions for strawberry culture were included in the only Virginia colonial treatise on kitchen gardening, written by John Randolph of Williamsburg and owned by Jefferson. John Custis of Williamsburg, beginning in 173, was repeatedly sent the recently discovered and much treasured Chili strawberry, as well as the European Hautboy, by Peter Collinson. When the transported plants survived the perilous trans-Atlantic journey and were not killed by overwatering, they perished during the heat and droughts of the Williamsburg summer. Around 1770 (his *Treatise* has not been precisely dated), John Randolph, woefully dependent on the knowledge of Philip Miller, said the Wood, Hautboy, and also the Scarlet or Virginia were "three sorts chiefly propagated," presumably in Williamsburg.

Continuing the pattern of offering fashionable European fruit rather than the acclimated natives, and with some notable exceptions, most urban nurseries sold only exotic strawberries before 1820. In contrast, limited commercial strawberry culture arose around large cities like Boston, Philadelphia, and New York in the early years of the nineteenth century, mostly based on strains of the native Scarlet. Growing strawberries for the market proved that most of the exotic species -- Hautbois, Alpine, Pine, and Chili -- were fickle curiosities rather than reliably productive sorts. Despite its *virginiana* parents, the Pine or Carolina Pine strawberry of Europe demanded milder temperatures and attentive cultural nursing to make it profitable. The Chili was not hardy in the North, the species suffered in the hot, humid South, and its imperfect flowering proved inconvenient in cultivation. As McMahon noted in 1806, the Scarlet was "so good as to be generally preferred to most others."

In theory, a native strawberry brought into the garden from the neighboring fields should be superior to its wild cousins due to the careful selection of vigorous plants, high-flavored berries, or heavy-bearing plants. Proper spacing in well prepared, irrigated, and manured soil, and the judicious removal of wayward runners will usually result in larger and tastier fruit. Jefferson provided some cultural advice to his granddaughter Anne Cary Randolph in 1808: "I am sorry our strawberries are so unpromising; however, I trust they will put out soon. If some sand and stable manure were put on the earth, the waterings would carry both down into the clay & loosen & enrich it." Historically there has been a prejudice against garden-grown strawberries. Duchesne's assertion that the strawberry's "size is obtained by cultivation, but [the] liveliness of its taste is diminished," has been, and still is, verified by committed gardeners. One popular technique that evolved in New York and New England in the 1820s was a deliberate attempt to imitate the prolific resurrection of wild strawberries following the burning of the native forest: garden strawberries were covered with one inch of dry straw and set on fire in the early spring.

Philip Miller in 1768 said the strawberry was so common that few English gardeners bothered to care for cultivated plants, a concern shared by Duchesne, who said that only a few French commercial growers manured, pruned, or mulched strawberries in the mid-eighteenth century. While Miller's discussion of strawberry culture was relatively brief, its influence was widespread and is still evident in the way, for example, many gardeners prepare "raised beds." One of the many popular derivations of the word "strawberry" comes from the shredded straw mulches used as winter protections and to prevent spring rains from splashing dirt on the ripening fruit, a practice as old as the cultivation of the fruit itself.

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