Strawberries Need Winter Protection

Strawberries need protection from the cold winter temperatures. They must be mulched each fall for protection against the cold temperatures which injure the crowns, roots and flower buds. If unprotected, the flower buds will be injured when the temperature falls below 20 degrees Fahrenheit. For every 5 degree drop in temperature the damage becomes more severe. Like many perennial plants, alternate freezing and thawing of unprotected plants will heave them out of the soil and also cause damage.

The exact time to apply the mulch varies from year to year. Applying the mulch too early in the fall before growth ceases may cause smothering of the plants as they attempt to continue growing under the covering. Allow the strawberry plants to harden off by exposing them to a hard frost or two, but cover them before the temperature drops below 20 degrees Fahrenheit.

There are several suitable winter mulches for strawberries. The material selected should be reasonably free of weed seeds and coarse enough so it does not pack easily. Clean wheat or oat straws are excellent cover mulches because the hollow stems trap and hold air which adds to the insulating value. Shredded corn stalks, marsh hay and soybean straw are also acceptable mulches. Avoid materials like tree leaves or sawdust because they pack too tightly and may smother the strawberry plants. The mulch should be spread evenly to a depth of 4 to 6 inches over the entire planting.

Leave the mulch on as long as possible in the spring. Check the plants periodically by lifting some of the mulch with a fork. Check for new growth which will be white or yellow in color. Do not remove the mulch as long as the majority of the leaves are dark green. Removing the mulch too soon will encourage the plants to produce flowers before danger of frost is past. If a late frost does not destroy the blooms completely, it damages them enough to produce nubby berries. It is a good idea to keep the mulch handy for awhile so that it can be tossed back over the blooming plants if frost threatens.

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