



Ethnobotanical Leaflets



The Strawberry

By Molly Maguire

The strawberry, a fruit of the genus *Fragaria*, has been around for many centuries. Throughout the centuries the strawberry has been studied, cultivated, reported upon, and simply enjoyed by millions. This very abundant fruit has had a variety of uses: It has been used for medicinal purposes; for decorations throughout a person's home; and, for the pleasure of eating.

The history of the strawberry goes back as far the Romans or maybe as far as the Greeks. In the thirteenth century, the first record of the strawberry was its use as a medicinal herb. It was thought to be good for digestive upset or the curing of gout. A short time later, it was pronounced that the strawberry was unfit to eat due to the fact that they grew close to the ground and therefore the fruit was contaminated. This caused many to avoid the fruit and decreased it's popularity (see [www "A Lesson in Strawberry History"](#)). Back during this time and the few centuries following, not only the strawberry but also many other plants were used in means of helping with the health and welfare of people. By the fifteen hundreds the cultivation of the strawberry was back underway and it had regained some of its popularity. Scientists and physicians had discovered the supposed medical uses and they then began to name many different species (Darrow 17). By the end of the century three species had been cited, *F. vesca*, the common garden strawberry, *F. moschata*, the musk strawberry and *F. viridis*, the green strawberry (Darrow 19).

The history of the modern strawberry had begun. This was now the time of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Individuals of these times were growing corn, potatoes, tobacco, tomatoes, and cotton and unbeknown to them the wild strawberries had appeared in their gardens (Wilhelm and Sagen xii). The strawberries were carefully cultivated and were considered to be important to healthful living. Leaves, roots, crowns, and fruit were used in preparing medicinal teas, syrups, tinctures, and ointments (Wilhem and Sagen 2). The gardeners were happy just cultivating the wild strawberry, but the first half of the seventeenth century brought about the development of the commercial big-fruited strawberry. The first step to bringing about the future of the modern strawberry was with *F. virginiana* (Darrow 23). The Virginia strawberry was the sire to this modern cross (Darrow 23).

Strawberries then began to be sold in marketplaces around the eighteenth century. They were most likely harvested in nearby fields or woodlands and not from commercial production areas. The consumption of strawberries became much more popular (see [www "A Lesson in Strawberry History"](#)). Commoners and royals would have patches of them in their own gardens for their own pleasure.

The study of the strawberry is a continuous and what seems to be a never-ending process just as other economic plants are. The strawberry as we know it today was originally grown in Northern Europe but it can be found in many other places (see [www "Strawberry Historical and Horticultural Facts"](#)). The common strawberry is today consumed on a regular basis by many and is still found growing in the gardens behind citizens homes along roadsides and out in the woodlands.

Why do we call it the strawberry? The word is peculiar to the English language, because no other language refers to a fruit or a plant by a name that suggests straw (Wilhelm and Sagen 24). The name has a variety of possible reasons for its origin. Sir Joseph Banks and William Johnson theorized about this. These two thought that there was good reason to believe that centuries ago when one placed straw, known as straw mulch, under the plants to protect them from the soil and diseases explained the name perfectly. They explained that the berries that grew on the plants were being protected by straw. That seemed like a logical explanation until a few years later and the second reason for the name strawberry was introduced. This suggestion was based on the fact that many young children were seen threading berries onto grass straw and selling them as "straws of berries". This reason was the accepted one for a while. Then came the third suggestion, it was based more on the cultivation and physiology of the strawberry. William and Edward Laxton thought that the runners on the plant matched straws. Then came another suggestion, and it was also introduced based on the runners, perhaps the runner plants were strewn over the ground and then the fruit was called the berry. This was also a logical explanation for the name because strewn comes from the verb to straw meaning to strew, scatter, spread, or disperse. The runners spread and establish new places to grow. The final suggestion was bearing no connection to straw mulch but derived rather from the noun *stre* and the cognate verb to strew (Wilhelm and Sagen 27). The name went from *strebengan* by the Romans, to *strewberzean* by the Anglo-Saxons then *strabery*, *streberie*, *straibery*, *strawberry*, and then finally strawberry in English (Wilhelm and Sagen 27). No where has it ever been stated the true reason for the naming of the strawberry, but as of now these few suggestions are the only connection to the name.

The strawberry can be found not only growing in one's garden but also in the wild. They also grow on dry grassy strips between fields under hedges and in gardens (Wilhelm and Sagen 15). The strawberry is part of the Rosaceae (rose) family. This plant is found growing rather close to the ground on a stem having three arrangements of flowers. When the fruit is in its developmental stage, it sends out runners. These string like; slender growths mature on the ground and transfer the roots out into the fertile soil. Once the plants roots are embedded in the soil, they yield a new group of plants, which then produce new plants and bear new fruit. Strawberries can be planted in all garden soil but the richer the soil the larger the crop (see [www "Strawberry Historical and Horticultural Facts"](#)). During the maturing of the strawberry fruit, the greenish-white fruits turn into a rich red color). Following maturation, the petals and the flowers fall and all that remains are the calyxes. Not every set of flowers produce fruit, but when growing a strawberry plant, you are usually ensured several sweet tasting fruits.

The actual fruit portion of the strawberry plant is known as the achenes. They look like what many would call the seeds of the plant. Reproduction of the plant, however, is often by runners. There are two different types of roots in the strawberry plant, the large primary ones found in the crown, and the small secondary lateral roots that make up the mass of the root (crown) system (Darrow 315). The flower arrangement of the strawberry is typically five-parted (Darrow 336). The flower parts are pressed in a regular pattern. First the stamens, then the petals, then the sepals, next the epicalyx, and finally the pistils. The berry size varies in different varieties of plants. The primary berries are the largest and ripen first, but not far behind are the secondary, tertiary, and quaternary.

"Strawberries are so wholesome and health-preserving, so fragrant and delicious that it is a small wonder that everyone should endeavor to make the season during which they are available last long as possible", said Henry de Vilmorin in article about the mountain or alpine strawberry (Wilhelm and Sagen 30). The alpine strawberry also known, as the Bargemont strawberry was one of the first varieties described. This strawberry belongs to the species *F. vesca*, it fruits twice a year, once in the spring and then again in the fall. But even though it has poor fruiting qualities it is rich in raspberry flavor (Wilhelm and Sagen 32). The second earliest variety described was the garden strawberry. This strawberry, known as the Haarbeer, was a plant with rough leaves plant that gave good crops. Just the opposite of the alpine strawberry. It was very different from the woods strawberry and very hairy. The fruit that it produced was half red and half-white (Wilhelm and Sagen 34). Although it was not red and plump like the other it made up for it with its outstanding flavor and fragrance.

Then along came another white and pale-fruited strawberry known as the Caption strawberry. It was believed to be derived from the plant stated before, the Haarbeer. This type of strawberry had excellent flavor and produced a great number of fruit. It was light colored and egg- shaped born on stalks rising higher than the leaves and was hard to pick (Wilhelm and Sagen 40). Years later a red form of the Caption was discovered. It was found growing in the mountains of Bohemia. These were large, shiny, rouge leaves and conical fruits, very different then the white Captions, Both types of Captions spread through out Europe. Finally selections were made from the red fruited Captions and then came the Moschata (Wilhelm and Sagen 45). These were fragrant, abundant strawberries found on Islands on the North coast of Bohemia. In the beginning the production of this fruit was poor but eventually they were interplanted with other strawberries and the production increased. These strawberries, the Caption and the Moschata were similar in habit and growth, they were then named *F. moschata*.

The yield of strawberry plants depends upon climate. Many strawberry plants do best in a cool, moist climate. The cultivated strawberry displays an extremely wide adaptation. The strawberry has been found in the tundra of Canada and Alaska and as far south as Louisiana and New Mexico (Darrow 357). The abundance of the plant is due to temperature and variability. The vitamin C content of strawberries is relatively high and varies with the temperature, light and variety (Darrow 364). Flavor of the strawberry also depends on the three climate types stated above. Many tests have been done in order to see if these three factors had something do with the overall taste. Went (1957) studied temperature and light on several different plant types and found that sugar content was entirely a function of light intensity during the day and was independent of the day or night temperature (Darrow 364). With many

more studies following, a general idea on the taste of the strawberry was concluded. The climate and time spent in the cultivation of strawberries is what makes this delightful fruit many peoples favorite.

Even today the strawberry is considered the most important and well-known small fruit of the Western Hemisphere. This fruit has been around for centuries and still found growing abundantly in the many of the same places that it was first cultivated and found. The strawberry plant is very fragrant, hence the name *Fragaria*, and a very delightful fruit. It is very tantalizing and sweet. Many would agree that it's one of the most flavorful economic plants of the twentieth century and still will be in the many more centuries to come. It has made many wonderful dishes and has adorned many homes. What more could anyone ask for in a simple plant?

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