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How Our Native Strawberry Became World-Famous

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By R. Kelly Coffey

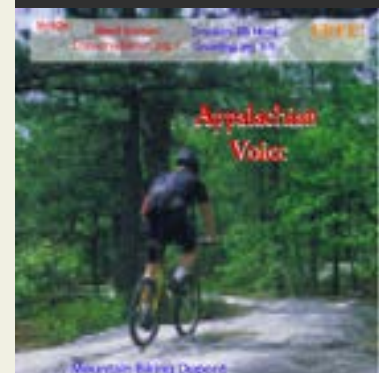
One day as 18th-century botanist William Bartram traveled on horseback through the southern mountains, he discovered he had entered a field so thick with strawberry plants that the crushed berries had dyed his horse's legs deep red.

At one point he rode for two miles across an area he described as "strawberry plains." The scattered patches of strawberry plants seen today in no way compare to the expansive fields of berries that were once a common sight. Yet, even though the wild strawberry is only a modest part of the modern natural landscape, it had a significant influence in the development of today's domesticated varieties.

Strawberry Fields Forever

The wild strawberry (*Fragaria virginiana*), a native of eastern

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North America, is a pioneer plant that thrives where trees and other vegetation have been cleared or burned. Such an environment was prevalent here before widespread European settlement. In landscapes with no human influence, fires set by lightning quickly eliminated trees and brush. Indians frequently burned the groundcover around their villages to make hunting and traveling easier.

When European settlers arrived and began farming, they often abandoned their agricultural fields after the soil nutrients were depleted, a practice that also encouraged a strawberry-friendly environment. Early travelers and writers, such as William Bartram, described locations with hundreds of acres of strawberries that flourished in these favorable conditions.

What is the ‘straw’ in the name ‘strawberry’? Various explanations have been put forward as to the origin of the unusual name. One theory is that the name refers to the straw-colored seeds dotting the exterior of the fruit. The fact that the ground-hugging plant produces berries that appear to be scattered or “strewn” among the leaves, led to the idea that the original name was “strewberry,” which evolved into strawberry.

Another explanation is tied to a cultivation method. The earliest American gardeners frequently transplanted the wild plants into cultivated beds. They used straw as a mulch in order to keep the berries clean - hence the name. Though many explanations exist, no single story has proven to be authoritative.

Before the name “strawberry” became popular, the fruit was known to colonial Americans as the “scarlet berry.” The first settlers quickly discovered that the fruit had an attractive color, a delicious taste, and - as the scientific name implies- filled the air with a pleasing fragrance. Open fields of wild strawberries attracted numerous people to the colonial version of pick-your-own berry farms.

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How Our Native Strawberry Became World-Famous



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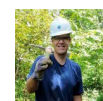


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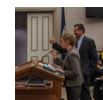
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The only drawback was the small size of the fruit. Intrigued by the prolific plant, however, colonists experimented with it and noticed that when the wild strawberry was transplanted into their gardens, the plant produced somewhat larger berries. Despite the marginal increase in size when cultivated, the wild strawberry is not genetically capable of bearing large berries suitable for widespread domestic or commercial production.

A Chance Meeting

Another native New World strawberry species can be found along the Pacific coast of the Americas. Known as the Chili berry (*Fragaria chiloensis*), the fruit lacks the attractive color, taste, and odor of *F. virginiana*, but it produces a much larger fruit - about the size of a small plum.

During the 1700s Europeans were very curious about American plants, and often went to great lengths to obtain them for their gardens. A French botanist named Amedee Frezier collected specimens of the *F. chiloensis* in South America, and endured a hazardous trip back to Europe to deliver the Chili berry, even using his rationed drinking water to keep the plants alive.

Once in Europe, the Chili berry was propagated, distributed to other interested botanists, and made its way to a garden in The Netherlands. The garden already contained a number of the scarlet berry plants - the native eastern North American species. Planted a short distance from each other, the two strawberry species hybridized, producing fruit with the best qualities of each: fragrant, red, tasty berries that were also large enough to make cultivation worthwhile. This accidental hybrid revealed to botanists that with a little experimentation and manipulation, *F. virginiana* could be developed commercially on a scale similar to other fruits such as apples, peaches, and pears.

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The ancestors of most of our modern food crops originated in the Old World or in the tropical latitudes of the Americas. After centuries of selection and breeding, modern fruits, vegetables, and grains bear little resemblance to their wild parents. The modern domesticated strawberry, in contrast, is a relatively recent horticultural development, and it is only a slightly modified version of the plant we can see just beyond our backdoors here in the southern Appalachians.

Professional gardener Peter J. Hatch aptly describes the wild strawberry's legacy by stating, "One wonders if any other native eastern North American plant has made such an important contribution to the world's horticulture."

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