

Green Gardening with Ann Lovejoy

Historic Marshall Strawberry

Grow Oldies and Goodies for Fabulous Flavor

Heritage fruit and vegetables have found renewed popularity in recent years, especially those with remarkable flavors. Here on Bainbridge Island, one of the most sought-after antique edibles is the Marshall strawberry. A century ago, largely because of this modest yet marvelous berry, Bainbridge island was known as “the fruit basket of Puget Sound.” Many island acres were covered in berry fields, tended and harvested by Japanese, Filipino, and Native American farmers.

In 1939, when King George IV and Queen Elizabeth made their tour of the British hinterlands, a literal boatload of Marshall strawberries sailed to Vancouver, bound for the royal luncheon table. When I first moved here, I met several people who remembered hand-packing over 800 crates of berries for that event. However, after WWII, the strawberry fields were largely abandoned and trees quickly moved back in. By the turn of this century, the reforested strawberry fields were covered with houses, and even on the remaining island farms, and those throughout the Northwest, the Marshalls were all but displaced by more uniform, ship-pable, and disease resistant varieties.

From Lost To Lustworthy

Today, Marshall strawberries are again highly sought after, considered by foodies to be the sweetest, most toothsome of their clan. Although Marshalls came to fame in the Pacific Northwest, they were first discovered in a Massachusetts garden in 1890. Carried across the country by pioneers, they readily established in the maritime Northwest, where native strawberries also flourish. Much loved by locals, Marshalls proved challenging to ship to market, since the berries are so high in brix (natural sugars) that they are best eaten as fresh as possible.

Until recently, only a handful of farmers and home gardeners (including me) continued to grow Marshalls in small quantities. Here on Bainbridge island, the local Historic Society grows a few plants, as do several island farmers. A food and farm education program for island school children grows some as well, but there are very few commercial sources for Marshalls, and most have very limited offerings (such as only one or two plants per customer) and boast several year waiting lists.

They're Back!

In 2004, a preservation group called RAFT (Renewing America's Food Traditions) named the Marshall strawberry among most endangered foods in America. Since then, Marshalls have become darlings of foodies, food writers, and chefs, who find any dessert that features these ruby gems will sell out in a nanosecond. Fortunately, a few nurseries have begun growing Marshalls and they are once again available to home gardeners. When happy, the plants produce large leaves and modest sized berries of unsurpassed succulence. For best flavor, give them good garden soil, well amended with compost. For best longevity, feed lightly once a month from April through August with a low-number, balanced organic fertilizer (such as a 5-5-5).

See www.loghouseplants.com for more
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Fragaria x ananassa 'Marshall'

*“The Marshall
Strawberry has
been chosen as
exceptional”*

– Ark of Taste