

The Neglected Mock Strawberry

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Above: The mock strawberry plant looks like a miniaturised edible strawberry plant.

During my first encounter with the mock strawberry plant at a local nursery, I felt it was an attractive, miniaturised version of the edible strawberry plant that exudes some charm.

The mock strawberry is, in fact, closely related to the edible strawberry. Botanically known as *Potentilla indica*, the mock strawberry is also known by another name – the Indian strawberry. Its Chinese name is 蛇莓 (she mei), which roughly translates into “Snake Strawberry”. It is a member of the Rose family, *Rosaceae*, and originates from southern and eastern continental Asia.

It is a plant that has been reclassified in different but closely related genera for several times. It was once regarded as a species of the genus *Fragaria*, which is the genus that the edible strawberry belongs to. It was then put into another closely related genus *Duchesnea* before being tagged finally to the genus *Potentilla*.



Left: The mock strawberry spreads via the extension of wire-thin stolons, a habit similar to the edible strawberry.

Individual mock strawberry plants are covered with fine hairs and adopt a similar rosetted growth habit like the edible strawberry. They grow no taller more than 5 cm tall. The foliage of this plant is soft and each leaf is very small, which are at most 2 cm in length. They are oval in shape, have serrated edges and usually borne in threes on a single leafstalk. Mock strawberry plants spread by sending out stolons in all directions joined via wire-thin stems.

The flowers of the mock strawberry are yellow and those in its edible counterpart are white. Although they are less than one centimeter in diameter, the five-petaled flowers of the mock strawberry stand out sharply against the green foliage and are hard to miss. Although they are decorative to some extent, they are, unfortunately, usually not produced in abundance.



Above: Pictures, clockwise from top, show the fruit development of the mock strawberry.

The minute fruits produced resemble the edible strawberry as they turn red when ripe and come complete with small red seeds that are stuck on its surface. The edible but rather bland fruits stay on the plants for a much longer period than the flowers.

Most Singapore gardeners want to grow the edible strawberry plant and we all know that it is an almost impossible feat to grow it successfully under our lowland tropical climate, without the expensive process to create the special growing conditions that the plant demands.

Unlike the edible strawberry plant, the mock strawberry grows very well as a perennial in the local hot and humid tropical climate. Since the mock strawberry plant is quite an attractive plant and for fans of the strawberry, it is probably the next best thing to grow, then why is the mock strawberry plant not a popular plant grown in our local gardens?

One sensible and obvious reason for the lack of popularity for this plant, I thought, could be due to the fact that the mock strawberry does not produce the large, sweet and juicy fruits like the edible strawberry. It would not be surprising that most gardeners, including edible strawberry fans would rather not waste time, effort and space to grow it.

Another reason is probably due to its invasiveness and the difficulties in controlling and eradicating it. The mock strawberry plant is well known as a nightmarish weed and one can quickly discover its notoriety via a search using any Internet search engine.

Should such negative reasons make one strike the mock strawberry plant off from one's list of plants to grow?

"No". I feel every plant has its own set of virtues and for the mock strawberry plant, its small size and the little red fruits are its source of novelty.

The mock strawberry plant definitely makes an ideal "miniature" container plant. Grown in an ornate container perched on top of a pedestal or on a tabletop with the stolons cascading over the sides of the container, it also makes an ideal candidate for hanging baskets.



Above: There are ways to grow the mock strawberry plant to keep it from wandering to places where it is not wanted, such as, to grow it in a pot that is located off the ground.

That way, the mock strawberry plant and its decorative red fruits can be appreciated at close range. Growing it in a pot located off the ground also prevents it from spreading itself to unwanted territories.



Above: I have a mock strawberry plant that is used as a groundcover to mask the unsightly bare ground below a hedge.

I have a mock strawberry plant in my community garden. The original plant has died due to drought but I have one new colony some months later, which probably started via a stray stolon that had found its way into the ground located just below my mock orange (*Murraya paniculata*) hedge. It has nicely conquered the entire area below the shrubs and formed a nice carpet that conceals the unsightly yellow clay below. A stolon or two can sometimes be found trying to root in the crevices between the mortarwork.

Besides being an ornamental plant, the mock strawberry has some folk medicinal uses and should be included in any medicinal plant garden. The whole plant, either fresh or dried, is used and is reported to possess depurative and febrifuge properties. It is used to reduce swelling and in the treatment of skin problems such as abscesses, eczema and ringworm, infections such as laryngitis and tonsillitis, as well as, snake and insect bites. Various parts of the plant may be boiled in water to yield a decoction or infusion. The fresh leaves can be crushed and applied externally as a poultice.

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The mockstrawberry grows best in semi-shaded conditions outdoors. For apartment gardeners, it should be grown on a sunny windowsill that has sunshine for at least 4 to 6 hours daily.

Although the plant is not particularly nutrient-hungry, it should be grown in friable, well-drained fertile soil. Slow-release inorganic or organic fertiliser pellets given according to the manufacturer's instructions are usually sufficient.

Organic matter should be incorporated into the growing medium to increase water retention ability. Soil should be kept moist at all times as an entire colony of plants can dry out and die from prolonged drought.



Left: Propagation is so easy - pick a wandering stolon off and pot it up separately to get a new plant!

Propagation is done most easily by detaching the stolons and potting them up separately. When newly potted, humidity of the air should be high and soil should be kept moist at all times. It is recommended to keep the plant out of the sun during this time.

Plants can be cut back to control growth periodically but all plant materials need to be discarded separately with domestic trash and care must be taken not to drop any such material in the garden. Stolons from cut plant material that dropped onto the ground may just take root and establish itself later.

Reference

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