



Blackberries for the Home Garden

Small fruits are becoming popular additions to the home garden. Blackberries, in particular, are productive and well suited for homeowners in most regions of North Carolina. Breeding programs have released a number of thornless varieties that are large, taste great, and because they have no thorns, are much easier to harvest than berries found in the wild. In addition, studies have shown that this fruit can help fight cancer, decrease cardiovascular disease, and slow down brain aging. And best of all, one blackberry plant can easily supply up to 10 pounds of delicious berries each year.

Blackberries are divided by their growth habit (trailing, semi-trailing, and erect), and by the presence or absence of thorns (thorny or thornless). All blackberries benefit from some sort of support such as a trellis or poles to support their canes. If you have room for several plants, select early-, mid-, and late-season varieties to extend your harvest (Table 1). Each of these varieties should perform well in all regions of North Carolina except where temperatures drop below 10° F.

Site Preparation

Prepare an easy-to-access location for your blackberries a year before planting. Blackberries need full sun and plenty of room to grow. The soil should be a well-drained sandy loam soil. A soil high in organic matter is beneficial under non-irrigated conditions. If the soil is not well drained, establish the plants in a raised bed.

Establishment and Maintenance

Erect and semi-trailing blackberry plants should be planted about 3 to 4 feet apart, while the trailing types need 6 to 8 feet between plants. They can be planted in the early spring several weeks before the last frost. Each plant can produce 10 to 20 pounds of fruit, so four to six plants can easily produce ample berries for a family of four.

Dig a hole that is large enough to allow the roots to spread out evenly. Set bare-rooted plants into the soil at the depth they were grown in the nursery. Fill in the hole and tamp down the soil. Water the newly set plants well, but don't fertilize until 3 or 4 weeks later.

Fertilize after growth starts with a complete fertilizer such as 10-10-10 at 5 pounds per 100 linear feet (or about 3 to 4 ounces around the base of each plant). In established plantings, apply the fertilizer in

March well before the plant starts to produce flowers and fruit.

Support the canes with a trellis. Erect and semi-trailing types perform well using a two-wire system with wires at 3 and 5 feet from the ground (Fig 1). As the canes emerge in the spring, evenly distribute them on the wires to form a fan pattern (Fig. 2) Once the canes have reached the top wire, remove the tips to encourage branching. Trailing types set further apart require a different system. Start with a similar trellis with wires at 3 and 5 feet, except *do not* tip the canes. Instead, allow them to grow to the top wire and then weave them back down to the bottom wire and back up to the top wire to fill in the space between plants (Fig. 3)

Blackberries require about 1 inch of water each week during the growing season. During fruit development, the plants will need about 2 gallons per plant each day. Mulch placed around the base of the plant reduces the need for water and helps keep weeds under control. Pine straw, wood chips, and seedless grasses are good mulches.

The fruit is ripe and at its peak sweetness when it is a dull black color. Pick fruits that are shiny black if you need to store them in your refrigerator. They won't be as sweet, but they will last longer. Harvest will continue for 2 to 3 weeks, depending on variety.

As soon as all the fruit is harvested, prune out all the old fruiting canes and remove them from the garden, as they no longer produce fruit. Continue to tie, tip, or train the new canes that have not produced fruit to the trellis until growth stops in the fall. During winter, prune laterals on erect types to 12 to 16 inches, and leave only 4 to 8 canes per square yard for fruit production in the following year (Fig 4).

Table 1. Comparison of blackberry varieties

Variety	Cane Type	Season	Comments
Arapaho	Erect	Early	Thornless, medium size, somewhat irregular shape
Natchez	Erect	Early to mid	Thornless, elongate fruit
Apache	Erect	Mid	Thornless, medium-size, portions of the fruit may turn white during hot weather
Navaho	Erect	Late	Thornless, late, small berry but stores better than all other
Ouachita	Erect	Mid	Thornless, medium size, stores well
Hull	Semi-trailing	Mid to late	Thornless, soft, not quite as late as Chester
Chester	Semi-trailing	Late	Thornless, large fruit, good for processing
Triple Crown	Trailing	Late	Thornless, distinct sweet flavor, fruit does not store well

Good horticultural practices can prevent insect and disease problems. Timely pruning, removing fruited canes, and maintaining a regular harvest schedule will help minimize common pests. If necessary, apply pesticides labeled for use on edible plants to manage insect and disease problems.

Blackberry Production Checklist

1. Choose a good site one year before you plant.
2. Prepare the soil before you plant: remove weeds, add organic matter, add fertilizer, make raised beds.
3. Choose a variety that is adapted to North Carolina and purchase disease-free plants.
4. Plant in spring (western NC) or spring or fall (central and eastern NC)
5. Build trellis (can be done before or within first year of planting).
6. Irrigate on a regular basis.
7. Allow 3 to 4 new canes per plant to grow to top wire.
8. Harvest a baby crop of fruit one year after planting, a full crop two years after planting.
9. After fruit is harvested, prune out fruiting canes.

Blackberry or black raspberry?

The core (technically the receptacle or torus) of the black raspberry fruit is hollow. The receptacle stays attached to the plant.



In a blackberry, the receptacle is harvested with the plant and you eat it.



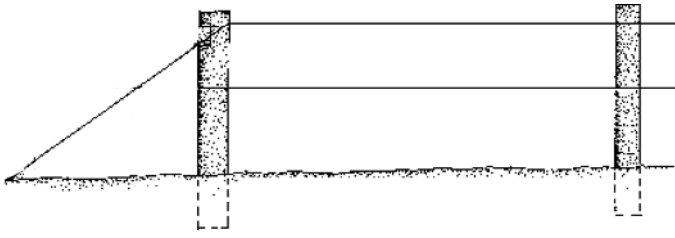


Fig. 1. Trellis system for blackberries.

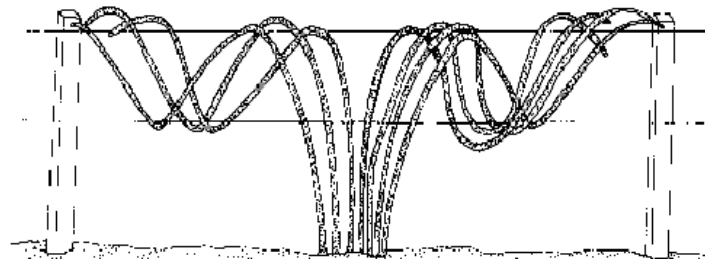


Fig. 3. Training system for trailing blackberries.

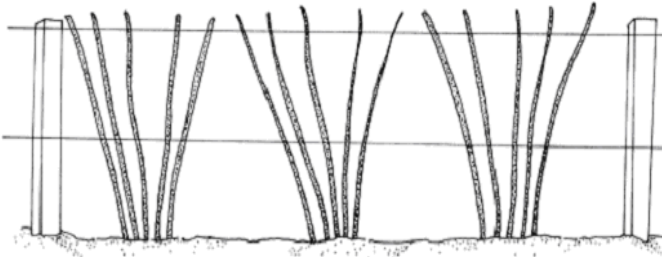


Fig. 2. Training system for erect and semi-trailing blackberries.



Fig. 4. Erect blackberries before and after winter pruning.

For More Information:
Commercial scale production:
<http://www.smallfruits.org/>

Other small fruits for the homeowner:
<http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/hort/hil/hfruitnew.html>

Help with insect and disease identification:
http://www.ncsu.edu/project/berries/diagnostic_tool/blackberry_diagnostic_tool.html

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