BLACKBERRIES FOR THE HOME GARDEN

Blackberries are relatively easy to grow in home gardens. Successful delicious and nutritious crops can come from proper plant selection, soil preparation, planting and cultivation.

Plant Selections for the High Country
North Carolina State University recommends the following cultivars for our mountainous region:
- Arapaho (thornless, erect)
- Kiawah (thorny, erect)
- Ouachita (thornless, erect)
- Chester (thornless, semi-erect)
- Navaho (thornless, erect)
- Cherokee (thorny, erect)
- Shawnee (thorny, erect)
- Cheyenne (thorny, erect)
- Triple Crown (thornless, semi-erect)

Watauga Cooperative Extension also hosts a 4-H Plant Sale of appropriate varieties each spring.

Site and Soil Preparation
Blackberries prefer a site that provides full sun and protection from freezing or scalding winds. Orient rows north to south if possible to prevent summer scalding of fruit, however avoid planting on a sunny southern or western slope, as this can promote early flowering. Late spring frosts can damage blossoms and leave you without any fruit.

Soil enrichment should begin before planting blackberries. A cover crop of sudangrass the year prior to planting or a winter cover crop of rye, oats or wheat will suppress weeds and provide valuable organic matter. Blackberries prefer soil that is well drained, high in organic matter and free of perennial weeds. Plants in soggy soils will not thrive. Ideal soil ph is 6.0 – 6.5. Test the soil four to six months before planting in order to have adequate time to amend according to test results. Avoid certain diseases by not using the same plots that have just grown peppers, tomatoes, eggplant, potatoes, peaches, apples, grapes or raspberries.

Proper Planting
Blackberry plants are usually purchased as bare root plants wrapped in a moist covering. It is very important to keep roots wrapped in moist sphagnum moss or wet burlap until they are planted into soil. Heeling plants into the soil for a temporary period is another way to keep plant roots healthy if the soil or weather conditions are not ideal for immediate planting. Ideally you should have your ground prepared before plants arrive.

When planting, prepare a hole large enough to allow roots to spread out naturally. Erect blackberry varieties are spaced 2-4 feet apart in rows. Semi – erect and trailing varieties are placed 4-8 feet apart in the planting rows. Cover the roots with 2-3 inches of moist soil. Gently press soil around roots to assure good contact. The plant’s crown (the point where the stem and root merge) should be set one inch below ground level. Water new plantings well.

Fertilization and Water
Blackberries are adapted to many soil types, however organic matter additions, pH adjustments and incorporation of appropriate fertilizers prior to planting and after planting help to ensure healthy productive plants. Follow soil test recommendations. It is best to apply fertilizer in early spring when growth starts and again in summer just after harvest. Use a 10-
10-10 commercial mix at the rate of 5 pounds per hundred linear feet of row. For the first year or two spread 3 or 4 ounces of fertilizer in a 12-inch radius around the base of each plant. Blackberries require abundant moisture while berries are growing and ripening. If rainfall is not adequate, supply water at the rate of 1 inch per week. Mulching will aid in the suppression of weeds and the loss of moisture. Keep weeds and grasses out of rows.

**Training and Pruning**

Train semi – erect blackberries to trellises. The erect blackberry varieties do not require support if the tops of the new canes are pruned during the summer to keep growth below 3 to 4 feet, however all brambles benefit from trellising.

Construct the blackberry trellis by stretching a wire between posts set 20 feet apart in the row. For erect blackberries, use one wire attached to the post about 30 inches from the ground. For semi-trailing blackberries, use two wires at heights of 3 feet and 5 feet from the ground.

Erect blackberries such as Cherokee and Cheyenne require pruning out of the root suckers that arise from the crown. During the growing season, it is desirable to allow root suckers to develop to about a 12-inch wide row. Any growth beyond this should be eliminated. When new shoots of erect blackberries reach 30 to 36 inches in height, cut off the tips. This will force branching lower on the canes and will cause the canes to thicken, making better support for heavy fruit crop. During the winter, prune the laterals to 12 to 14 inches for convenient harvesting and larger berries. In late winter, remove any remaining dead or weak wood. Leave healthy, vigorous canes spaced at six canes per linear foot. As soon as the last fruit has been picked in summer, cut all the old canes and burn them. This is a good time to tip prune and thin new shoots.

Usually, only a small crop of fruit is produced in the first season. If growth is poor during this first season, cut the canes back to several inches in late winter to force development of sturdier, more fruitful canes. In the second and succeeding years, shoot growth should be more vigorous and upright. Tie these new shoots to the trellis when they reach a length of 4 to 6 feet. Pruning old canes is critical to the prevention of disease. After harvest, prune damaged or weak canes, leaving 4 to 8 new shoots. Tie them in a fan shape, not bunched up. In the spring before growth starts, prune any laterals back to 12 inches to encourage larger fruit.

*Written by Carol Hancock, Extension Master Gardener Volunteer, Watauga County Center*

*Blackberry image: http://www.flickr.com/photos/7304492@N06/417733875/*