

Blackberries / Rubus

A Garden Guide

Blackberries are an excellent addition to edible gardens. With adequate mulching, they can be grown in most areas of WNC. They are perennial plants, meaning their roots survive for years. Their canes, however, are short-lived. Blackberry fruits are very nutritious, and the plants are highly productive.



Blackberries have different growing habits (trailing, semi-trailing, erect), can come with or without thorns, and can be primocane (fruiting on first year canes) or floricanes (fruiting on second year canes). If you have room, you can extend your harvest season by choosing early, mid, and late season varieties. Newer thornless varieties are available that are delicious and much easier to harvest. There are also new dwarf Blackberries that can be grown in containers - while the plants stay small, the fruits are large - perfect for those with space constraints. Although Blackberries are self-pollinating, for best production and fruit quality, **plant at least two different varieties.**

Siting: Blackberries need full sun (6-8 hours of direct sunlight). Wild berries can carry diseases. Remove any within 100 ft of planting site.

Planting: Blackberries need rich, well-draining soil, with a pH of 5.8-6.8. A good soil test will tell you exactly what to add, but usually in our soils, blackberries will need at least 1/3rd soil conditioner, up to 1/3rd rich composts, mixed with our native clay. We carry numerous excellent organic soil amendments suitable for growing them, such as composted cow manure, fish emulsion, worm castings, and more.

Prior to planting, deeply water or soak the roots. This can be done while you're preparing the planting area. Applying mycorrhizae directly to the roots, during the planting process, will improve overall plant health and resilience.

Plant erect and semi-trailing blackberries 3-4' apart, trailing types 6-8' apart. Dig a hole 2-3x the width of the pot, but no deeper than the pot. Gently loosen and untangle the roots, and plant the blackberries to the same depth as they were in the original pot. Install trellis now (or soon), mulch generously, and water deeply. A 2-3" layer of mulch will help to conserve moisture, deter weeds, and slowly improve soil health. We also carry different types of mulch, such as mixed hardwood and pine straw, which are suitable for blackberries. If planting multiple plants, it's easier to dig a trench.

Fertilizing: Work in organic composts or Plant tone when new growth appears in spring, and post harvest. Compost tea is a wonderful snack for your plants during the growing season.

Watering: Slowly, deeply, and once weekly during the first growing season. Supplemental water will be needed during dry periods - drought can compromise fruit production. Less water will be needed during rainy periods. Remember, too much or too little water can cause significant health issues.

Pruning: Pruning can be summarized as removing old, already-fruited canes to make room for new ones.

Trailing Blackberries - wait for the old floricanes to die back somewhat in cooler temperatures, in order for the plants to absorb as many nutrients as possible. When removing the old canes, add mulch. In spring, after the risk of severe cold weather has passed, train the old primocanes (now floricanes) on the wires.

Erect Blackberries - These are great for creating an edible hedge! In summer, keep the primocanes trimmed to around 4'. The trimming will encourage branching (which means more fruit next year) and also keep the plants manageable. In winter, remove the old fruited canes (floricanes).

Erect Blackberries (Primocane Fruiting) - In late winter, cut all the canes down to 2-3" above the ground. When 3.5' tall in summer, can be pruned back by 6" to encourage more branching and larger late harvest.

Semi-Erect Blackberries - Prune the Primocanes when nearing 5' tall. Trim back by a few inches repeatedly to encourage branching. In winter, remove the old fruited canes (floricanes). Train the primocanes (new floricanes) up the trellis.

Harvesting: Blackberries do not ripen after being harvested. Only pick ripe, fully black berries with a dull sheen, that require little effort to remove. You can harvest them when the fruits are shiny black, they won't be as sweet, but they will last longer.

Harvest during the cool parts of the day. Eat, refrigerate, or freeze as soon as possible.

Blackberries can be turned into jams, jellies, slushies, ice cream, pies, cobbler, juices, smoothies, ferments - countless delicious options!

Trellising: There are different kinds of trellis systems that can be constructed. Each style has pros and cons, but overall they make it easier to manage plants, easier to harvest, improve air flow, and thereby improve plant health. Ideally they will be installed prior to planting, although it is also manageable while plants are still small and young. For an excellent guide on trellising, see the [NCSU Cooperative Extension Service publication "Trellis Systems"](#).

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