

Black Berries

Blackberries are extremely tolerant of site and soil conditions. They are especially unusual in that they will produce a reasonable crop of berries even when grown in deep shade. Delicious both cooked or eaten fresh, they are bursting with flavour and excellent for your health.

Blackberry canes are not widely grown, because previously they were readily available growing wild amongst hedgerows. But these hedgerows are disappearing fast and it now makes sense to grow them in your garden or allotment.

Where To Grow a Blackberry

Blackberries will grow reasonably well in almost all soils and even in deep shade. Remember though, that blackberry plants may well last for 15 years or so, so do try and start them off in the best possible conditions available.



Loch Ness - click to enlarge)

As far as soil is concerned, they will produce of their absolute best on a medium, well-drained soil which contains plenty of organic matter. They like the soil to hold a good supply of water, especially when the fruits are developing in summer. The worst soil for a blackberry is light chalky soil - lots of well rotted compost will help to improve these conditions.

Thorny varieties of blackberry are the strongest growing, so choose these if the soil conditions are not ideal - 'Himalaya Giant' is the best variety to grow where the site or soil conditions are not ideal. Good fruits will still be produced and the poor conditions will reduce the excessive vigour of this variety

Positioning of blackberry canes is a personal matter dependant on your garden. The best berries will be produced when they are in full sun. However, where space is at a premium, a blackberry cane will produce good crops even when grown in deep shade - none of the other common fruits will survive in these conditions.

Blackberries produce their flowers very late in the season so frost will never be a problem. Low lying land or frost pockets are quite suitable for blackberries.

Soil Preparation

Two or three weeks before planting, dig the soil over and incorporate as much organic matter as possible. The aim is make the soil able to retain the moisture which will see the blackberries through the summer with little or no need for watering.

BLACKBERRY QUICK GUIDE

Latin Name

Rubus fruticosus

Type

Hardy perennial cane

Site and Soil

Very tolerant, but full sun and medium well-drained soil best.

Plant to Harvest Time

Two years

How Many?

3kg (7lbs) per plant

When To Plant A Blackberry Cane

The best month to plant blackberry canes is [mid-October](#) - the soil is still warmish, but there is also sufficient moisture in the soil to keep the newly planted canes happy.

If you miss [mid-October](#) , don't worry, any time up to [mid-March](#) is OK as long as the soil is not frozen or water-logged.

How to Plant A Blackberry Cane

First decide how far apart to plant the canes. This varies considerably depending on the variety being planted. The strong growers such as Himalaya Giant and Bedford Giant should be planted about 4m (13ft) apart. Medium strength growers such as John Innes, Merton Thornless and Parsley-Leaved need to be planted about 2.5m (8ft) apart. The less vigorous growers, such as Merton Early need about 1.2m (4ft) between plants. Ask your garden centre for advice if in doubt.

When planting the canes, keep the crown of the roots level with the soil surface. this normally means digging a broad hole about 12cm (5in) deep. Spread the roots out into the hole and cover them in crumbly soil, firming it down with your hand. When planted. water well to provide moisture in the initial stages of growth. Cut the plants back to a good bud about 30cm (12in) high.

Immediately after planting (before if you want), trim the canes to a length of 25cm (10in). It's tempting to leave the canes longer, hoping they will produce fruit next year, but this does not pay off in the long run.

Supporting and Pruning Blackberries

Many complicated articles have been written on how to train and support blackberries. In fact, blackberries have only three main needs that make support and training important - light, circulating air and removal of last year's fruiting stems.

As far as pruning is concerned, it's simple. As soon as the blackberries have been picked, cut the stems which have produced berries this year to ground level. Don't prune any stems which have not produced fruit this year, they will be the ones which produce blackberries next year. With thorny, strong growing varieties a good pair of gardening gloves (strong trousers and shirt as well, if you have them!) are essential. If you have the time, during [mid-April](#) have a good look at the new stems and cut back maybe 25% of those which are growing very vigorously.

Supporting blackberries is not essential with the stronger growing varieties, although all blackberries appreciate a modicum of support. The idea behind supporting them is to permit a free circulation of air within the plant, thus helping prevent disease in general.

The best way to do this is to put wooden posts into the ground every 2m (6ft) and run wires between them at 70cm (2ft) heights up to 2m (6ft) high. As the new stems grow, tie some of them into the wires. The result will be that some stems will be unsupported and form a natural arch over the ground, whereas others will be tied to the supports and grow slightly higher. This will result in less congestion at the centre, promoting greater circulation of air and exposing much of the plant to the sun. If you have the time to support all the stems, so much the better.

Care of your Blackberry

Plant your Blackberry cane well and it will require little care. Water them when conditions become dry, especially if this occurs when the berries are forming. An annual dressing of well-rotted compost will see them throughout the season. Where compost is not available, use a long lasting fertiliser such as bonemeal. Blackberries are self-fertile and so will produce fruit even if only one plant is grown.

Harvesting Blackberries

The berries are produced on the previous year's growth, and for this reason, no blackberries will be produced during the first year.

It should be possible to start harvesting the berries in [early July](#) depending on the variety. Most varieties can be harvested from [early August](#) up until [early October](#) if the weather is good.

It's best to pick the fruit little but often to encourage the formation of more fruit. Frequent picking will also reduce the risk of the fruit over-ripening and rotting which will only encourage disease. The best time to pick blackberries is when the weather is dry - wet blackberries do not keep longer than a day before they begin to rot.

Propagate Your Blackberry

It is an easy job to propagate a blackberry, even for novice gardeners. The best time is around [mid-September](#). Select a stem which is in perfect condition (growing vigorously with no blemishes) and bend it's tip to the ground. Where it touches the ground, dig a small hole about 15cm (6in) deep and bury the tip of the stem into the hole. Cover with crumbly soil to the surrounding soil level. If the stem looks like springing out of the hole, place a few largish stones over the soil to keep it in place (remove them two months later). Water well if the conditions are dry.

The stem tips will root in a couple of month's time, and can be dug up and moved to their final position early Spring next year. To do this, sever the parent stem about 30cm (12in) from the new plant. Dig up the new plant, trying to avoid any root disturbance and plant in their new positions.

Varieties of Blackberry

Early Season

Bedford Giant	Thorny, vigorous grower	Large black fruit, very good taste.	Heavy crops for four weeks.
Merton Early	Thorny, very compact grower	Glossy fruit, good taste.	Heavy cropper for around a month

Middle Season

Himalayan Giant	Very thorny, very vigorous	Large black fruit, slightly acidic taste	Heavy cropper over six or seven weeks
Merton Thornless	No thorns, medium vigour	Medium sized fruit, the best taste	Good cropper over 6 weeks

Late Season

John Innes	Medium thorns, vigorous grower	Large black fruit, excellent taste	Good cropper, avoid cold sites
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Blackberry Pests and Diseases

CAUSE	SYMPTOMS
<u>Blackberry Rust</u>	At first, red spots appear on the top of the blackberry leaves, followed by yellow spots on the underside of the leaves, eventually turning black.
<u>Aphids</u> (green/black fly)	Lots of small black or green insects especially concentrated around tender new blackberry shoots.
<u>Cane Spot</u>	Circular dark purple spots on the blackberry stems which start to appear in early summer.
<u>Botryitis</u> (mould)	Brown spots on the blackberry stems which get bigger as the disease progresses. Grey mould eventually forms
<u>Mildew</u>	A light grey powdery substance appears mainly on the stems, but spreads to the leaves and possibly the fruit.
<u>Raspberry Beetle</u>	Fruit is shriveled up, dry and smaller than normal.
<u>Spur Blight</u>	In August, dark purple spots appear. these become bigger and turn silver with black spots.