Thimbleberries

Rubus parviflorus (**Thimbleberry**) is a species of *Rubus*, native to western and northern North America, from Alaska east to Ontario and Minnesota, and south to northern Mexico. It grows from sea level in the north, up to 2,500 m altitude in the south of the range. The plant is said to have given its name to the Thimble Islands in Connecticut, although it is very rarely seen in that region.

It is a dense shrub up to 2.5 m tall with canes 3-15 mm diameter, often growing in large clumps which spread through the plant's underground rhizome. Unlike most other members of the genus, it has no thorns. The leaves are palmate, 5-20 cm across, with five lobes; they are soft and fuzzy in texture. The flowers are 2-6 cm diameter, with five white petals and numerous pale yellow stamens. It produces a tart edible composite fruit 10-15 mm diameter, which ripen to a bright red in mid to late summer. Like other raspberries it is not a true berry, but instead an aggregate fruit of numerous drupelets around a central core; the drupelets may be carefully removed separately from the core when picked, leaving a hollow fruit which bears a resemblance to a thimble, giving the plant its name.

THIMBLEBERRY QUICK GUIDE

Latin Name
Rubus parviflorus

Type
Cane Fruit

Site and Soil
Sunny (part shade is OK). Soil well drained, well-dug and composted before planting.

Plant to Harvest Time
2 years

How Many?
Unknown

The species typically grows along roadsides and in forest clearings, commonly appearing as an early part of the ecological succession in clear cut and forest fire areas.

Where To Grow Your Thimbleberry Cane

Thimbleberries commonly grow on open, wooded hillsides, along streambanks and canyons, on borders, and roadsides. They frequently occur as scattered individuals, but in some areas in dense contiguous patches. Thimbleberries are moderately shade tolerant.

Thimbleberries grow well on a variety of barren infertile soil types. They tolerate a wide range of soil temperature and pH but requires adequate soil moisture for good growth. They grow well on dry, rocky soil and deep well-drained loam. Growth best on loam or clay-loam, fair on sandy loams, but poor on gravel, sand, or clay. They grow well on soils derived from a variety of parent materials.

A nitrogen-demanding species keep well fertilized.

When and How To Plant Thimbleberries

Thimbleberries reproduce through seed but also regenerates vegetatively, even in the absence of disturbance. They are capable of forming dense thickets through

vegetative sprouting. Establishment from seed appears to be the primary mode of colonization in newly disturbed areas. Abundant seedling establishment typically occurs during the first year after disturbance. The Fruits, or "berries," are made up of an aggregate of numerous small red drupelets which fall to the ground when ripe. Seed averages ¾" in length. Seeds have a hard, impermeable endocarp and dormant embryo. Consequently, germination is often slow. Allelopathic compounds produced by Bracken Fern (*Pteridium aquilinum*) can apparently inhibit germination and subsequent growth.

Groups of seedlings occasionally germinate from rodent caches. However, small mammals generally play only a local role in seed dispersal. Birds often effect wider dispersal. Gravity may also aid in seed dispersal.

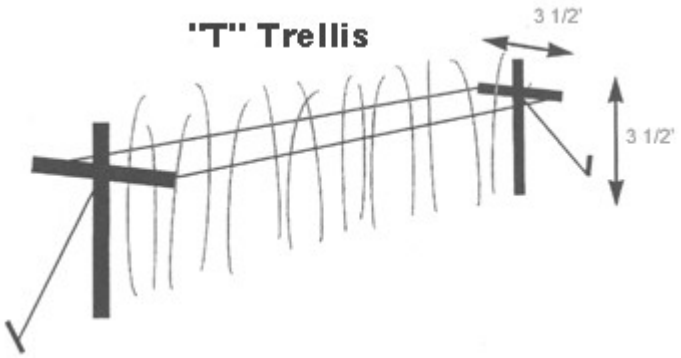
Thimbleberries are strongly rhizomatous, also capable of vigorous sprouting from rootcrowns and roots. A single seedling can spread and occupy a relatively large area as rhizomes develop and spread. Most local expansion of this shrub is attributable to rhizome sprouting.

Initial propagation is reportedly more difficult than for other *Rubus* species. Seed may be difficult to obtain commercially. Specific germination requirements have not yet been documented, but both warm and cold stratification are probably required. Most *Rubus* seeds require, as a minimum, warm stratification at 68 º to 86 º F for 90 days, followed by cold stratification at 36º to 41º F for an additional 90 days. These conditions are frequently encountered naturally as seeds mature in summer and remain in the soil through the cold winter months.

Laboratory tests indicate that exposure to sulfuric acid solutions or sodium hyperchlorite prior to cold stratification can enhance germination. They may be propagated vegetatively by planting stem cuttings or rhizome fragments. Best results have been obtained from starting dormant rhizome segments. Several cultivars are now commercially available.

Thimbleberries can be trellised the same way a raspberry plot would be trellised. They will require more space though and make sure to plant rows east to west to allow for proper air flow between plants. Thimbleberries tend to grow in dense patches and a t or v-trellising system can be employed.

Figure 1.



For the **T trellis**, sturdy posts should be set in the row with 3½-foot-long cross arms affixed at a height of 3½ to 4½ feet. The posts should be set at least two feet deep

in the ground and anchored at each end of the row. Secure heavy-gauge wire along the length of the row on each side of the cross arms (Figure 1).

Figure 2.

For the **V trellis**, two posts should be set at each end of the row at about a 30-degree angle so that they are 3½ feet apart at a height of 3½ feet. Run the wire from each post at 3½ feet (Figure 2). After pruning, tie the fruiting canes to the wires on each side.

Care For Your Thimbleberries

Thimbleberry fruits grow from this year's shoots on last year's branches. The aim of the first year's pruning of thimbleberry canes is to encourage the plants to establish a good root system and prevent them from producing fruits. During June if any fruits appear, pinch them off. If you do this, you will not get any fruit the first summer but the root system will be encouraged to grow well.

For thimbleberries, prune from the second year onwards by cutting down all of the previous year's branches to 15cm (6in) from the ground as soon as possible after the fruit has been harvested - this will be around July time. Any weak looking new shoots should also be cut down. Tie in the remaining shoots to the support wires as they grow throughout the summer.

The plants need a ready supply of water to produce good fruits. Depending on the soil type, watering throughout the summer on a weekly basis may well be needed. All thimbleberries will appreciate a layer of well rotted compost being applied to the soil in February each year. Because thimbleberry roots are very near the surface, do not dig the compost into the soil - this will damage the roots. In the absence of compost, scatter a handful of bone meal to each square metre (3ft).

Thimbleberry Picking or Harvesting

Thimbleberries which have been picked do not store well at all - they will only last a day or so. They are also easily damaged during picking and in storage. The best solution is to pick them on the day they are required and do not let them be crushed by their own weight. The fruit does not all ripen at the same time, so harvesting can take place over several weeks.

Thimbleberries freeze very well. Initially freeze them spread out on a plate or dish to stop them all freezing into a mass. When frozen they can be put in plastic bags or containers and stored in the freezer for a couple of months.

New Thimbleberries For Free

New growths will spring up from around the base of existing thimbleberries during the spring and summer. These should be dug up including some parts of their root system in October and transplanted to their new place - the chances of success are very high.