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Grow your own blackberries

By John Begeman and Laura Murphy

It's a shame that we can't grow raspberries here in the low desert; however we can grow the next best bramble, blackberries! Texas A&M has developed several varieties that grow well in our desert environment, producing an abundance of large, sweet berries.

Blackberries are perennial plants, but each shoot is biennial. Each shoot only survives for 2 years. During the first year a shoot, referred to as a cane, produces leaves only. During the second year the cane produces fruit and then dies soon afterwards. However, once planted, new canes continually arise from buds at the base of old canes and from buds on the roots for sustained fruiting.

The varieties of blackberries that do best here are cultivars that have their origin in Texas. Research done by Dr. Glenn Wright at the University of Arizona's Yuma Agricultural Center indicated that the blackberries 'Rosborough' and 'Womack' performed best in the low desert, followed by 'Brisson' and 'Brazos'. These varieties are cold hardy down to 5°F, and can be grown even in higher elevations of Arizona. All have large fruit produced on erect canes that do not require trellising for support, as do trailing types.

Blackberries can be purchased as potted plants at some area garden centers or as bare-root plants through the mail. The largest supplier of Texas blackberry cultivars is Womack's Nursery in De Leon, Texas.

Blackberries prefer to grow in soils amended with organic matter. Yard compost, composted manure, and peat are all good forms of organic matter to mix into the soil. Because row plantings are recommended it's best to prepare the soil in a 3 to 4 foot wide swath, digging organic matter into the top 12 inches of soil. Remove rocks, stones and any lumps of caliche. At the same time, till in a general-purpose fertilizer such as 10-10-10 at the rate of one-half pound per 10 feet of row. Plants should be spaced and planted every 3 feet down the center of the

swath of prepared soil. If multiple rows are desired, spacing between rows should be 10 to 12 feet.

The second year, and thereafter, apply 1 pound of 10-10-10 or similar fertilizer alongside the rows in February. After harvesting the berries in May apply an additional one-half pound of fertilizer every 10 feet down the length of the row.

Because blackberries prefer a slightly acid soil ph, it may be necessary to add micro-nutrients if leaves yellow. Iron, magnesium and zinc can be purchased in 'chelated' form and applied to the soil in the spring or summer to correct deficiencies.

Water is critical for newly planted blackberries. Plants should be watered daily for the first few weeks after planting, then gradually adjusted to provide deep watering two or three times weekly spring through fall. In the winter, when plants are dormant, water on 14 day intervals. A 3 inch layer of organic mulch (compost, straw or shredded wood) should be placed around plants and down the row immediately after planting to conserve moisture and moderate soil temperatures. This will also help to control weeds.

During the first year of growth, new vegetative canes will grow. During the summer prune these canes back to a height of 36 inches. This limits cane height and forces small lateral side-shoots to grow. It's the side-shoots which bear the fruiting clusters the following year. Also during the summer remove any shoots that may have grown up outside the parameters of the three foot wide row. If desired, these shoots can be dug out and replanted to lengthen or add more rows of berries.

In the second year, after canes have produced fruit they will die and should then be removed. This will provide the needed space for continued development of the following year's fruiting canes.

Blackberries are highly perishable. They should be harvested as soon as ripe, usually in May, handled very carefully and either eaten fresh or placed in the refrigerator. It may be necessary to harvest daily to prevent loss of fruit. Blackberries will store well in the refrigerator for up to seven days. Covering blackberries prior to fruit ripening is also recommended to keep the birds for harvesting your fruit before you get a chance!

John Begeman is from the University of Arizona; Laura Murphy is a Lake Havasu City Master Gardener. For more information, contact the Lake Havasu City Master Gardeners by calling their Hot Line at 505-4105 or visit us at Home Garden Day from 11 am to 1 pm the first Tuesday of every month at the Library.

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