

Growing Your Own

A beginner's guide to gardening

Blackberries

Blackberries are a delicious and healthy fruit but can be costly to buy. You may have picked wild blackberries in Kentucky. Why not plant some blackberry varieties in your backyard that will produce better fruit? Plant their roots and your blackberry patch will grow new canes each spring. You can pick your own fresh fruit for years to come.

Blackberries are *brambles*, which are prickly vines or shrubs in the rose family. Their aboveground shoots are called *canes*.

Varieties

Blackberries are either thorny or thornless. Plants are also grouped by their growth habits. Erect types have more upright canes. Semi-erect types have arching canes. Trailing types grow close to the ground. Trailing blackberries are not recommended for Kentucky. Erect types may not need trellising, but you can trellis all types of brambles to save space.

Most blackberry types make fruit on *floricanes*, which are two-year-old canes that bear fruit in the summer. There is another type of blackberry called *primocane* that produces flowers and fruit on one-year-old canes. Primocane-fruited blackberries do not produce much fruit in Kentucky.

These varieties are thornless and grow well in Kentucky.

- **Apache** (erect)
- **Osage** (erect)
- **Triple Crown** (semi-erect)

For more variety recommendations, see [Growing Blackberries and Raspberries in Kentucky \(HO-15\)](#).



Blackberry flowers with fruit forming in centers

Jann Knappage,
University of Kentucky



Triple Crown
Nourse Farms

Blackberry Planting

Depth Cover all roots with at least 1 inch of soil
Rows 4-8 feet apart (depending on need for walking between rows)

Spacing **Erect** 2-3 feet apart **Semi-erect** 8 feet apart

Safe Planting Dates

late March through early April



Planting bare-root blackberries in a trench
UK CSA

How much to plant

A 10- to 15-foot row of blackberry plants can produce enough fresh fruit for a family to enjoy. If you also want to make jams and baked goods, plant more.

When and how to plant

Choose a spot with deep, well-draining soil. Plant in full sun if possible. If grown in partial shade, they may give less fruit.

Raised beds can increase fruit yield and may prevent root rot. You can make a bed by mounding soil, or you could build a raised bed with bricks, pavers, stone, or untreated wood and fill it with soil. See [Preparing your Garden \(NEP-219\)](#) for more tips.

Do not plant where you have grown other food crops in recent years to avoid diseases affecting the blackberry roots and canes. You may add compost or a slow-release fertilizer a few weeks before planting.

Blackberries are often purchased as bare-root plants. Do not let the roots dry out before planting. They should be planted in early spring (late March to early April). Dig a wide hole deep enough to spread out the roots. Cover the roots with about an inch of soil. Firm soil around the roots. Water well. Apply mulch around plants to help manage weeds and keep moisture in the soil.

After planting, trim off the cane at ground level. New canes will grow from the crown. The crown is the short, thick stem where the roots meet the canes. Keep soil moist until you see new canes emerging from the soil. It may take four to six weeks for the new canes to grow out of the ground. These canes will be green.



New brambles growing in a mulched bed
Kristi Durbin, University of Kentucky



Blackberry wire supports on a fence
Erika Olsen, University of Kentucky

Trellis

Blackberry canes can grow very tall, so a trellis might be needed. Two wires are usually recommended, at three feet and six feet. Be sure to tie up any trailing canes so they don't touch the soil; they can grow new roots from the tips on the ground and spread. Blackberry canes are loosely tied or clipped to the support wires in a fan shape as they grow. You can grow erect blackberry types without a trellis.

Summer tip removal

Do not trim your new brambles during the first summer after planting. In future years, use summer tip removal to get more fruit. Floricane-fruiting blackberries grow fruit on the side shoots that grow out from the canes. Once blackberry canes are four feet tall, pinch or cut off an inch or two of the tips. This will help the plant grow more side shoots and make more fruit.



Tying blackberry canes to wire supports
Jann Knappage, University of Kentucky



Blackberries growing with simple wire trellis
Jann Knappage, University of Kentucky

Winter pruning

Pruning is cutting a plant to change its shape, help its growth, or remove any dead material. Prune blackberries in the winter or early spring. Prune canes before they start to push out new leaves in the spring (early to mid-March). Do not prune in the fall before the plants go dormant as it may affect next year's crop or introduce disease.

For florican-fruiting blackberries, remove any canes that fruited the last season before the new growing season starts. These canes will look dried and brown because they are dead. Prune side shoots to 18 inches long. Also cut out all canes that have grown outside your base row and thin to suggested spacing. When thinning, remove the smallest canes and trim back the canes you keep (see Blackberry Winter Pruning table).

Blackberry Winter Pruning

Row base width	12 inches
Thinning	3–6 canes per row foot
Trim canes	4–5 feet tall
Trim laterals	12–18 inches



Large bramble patch before and after winter pruning

Kristi Durbin, University of Kentucky



Canes are trimmed back to four or five feet.

Kristi Durbin, University of Kentucky

Pests and diseases

Many pests and diseases can affect blackberries. To lessen problems, pick up dead leaves and canes. Keep your rows narrow and thinned out so air can flow through the canes and leaves will dry quickly. Harvest all fruit often. Cover with insect netting when the fruit starts to show color to prevent problems with insects and birds. Remove wild brambles nearby.

If your bramble leaves become oddly shaped or colored, the plant may have a virus or fungal infection. If the canes develop cankers or swell, this may be a disease like cane blight, anthracnose, or a pest called the rednecked cane borer. Remove any diseased plant parts and put them in the garbage or burn them. Do not add them to your compost pile.

Spotted wing drosophila is a fruit fly that lays eggs in soft fruit and will make the fruit watery and mushy. This pest is common in late-summer berries.

If you find fruit that are soft and mushy you may not want to eat them, but you can place them in the freezer right after picking. They can still be used for smoothies or baked goods.

If your plants need pesticides, apply in the late afternoon to avoid hurting pollinators. For more tips on handling pests and diseases, check the UK Cooperative Extension publication [*Growing Blackberries and Raspberries in Kentucky \(HO-15\)*](#) or talk to your county Extension agent.



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Anthracnose cankers on bramble cane

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UGA1496494

Rednecked cane borer tunnel

University of Georgia Plant Pathology, University of Georgia, Bugwood.org, CC BY 3.0



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Blackberry leaf with orange rust

Penn State Department of Plant Pathology and Environmental Microbiology Archives, Penn State University, Bugwood.org, CC BY-NC 3.0



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Spur blight cankers appear at the leaf nodes on bramble canes.

Mary Ann Hansen, Virginia Polytechnical and State University, Bugwood.org, CC BY 3.0



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Spotted wing drosophila larvae in a mushy raspberry

Hannah Burrack, North Carolina State University, Bugwood.org, CC BY 3.0



Ripe blackberries ready to pick, next to unripe fruit

Gerald Holmes, Strawberry Center, Cal Poly San Luis Obispo,
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Harvesting

Ripe berries will come off the plant when pulled gently. Pick ripe fruit often, either daily or every other day. Pick fruits with care and gently place them in a container. Put fresh fruit in the refrigerator right after picking.

Serving

Blackberries are delicious fresh or cooked. Gently wash fruit before eating. They make great jams, pies, sauces, muffins, cakes, and other desserts. You can strain cooked berry products to remove seeds.

Storing

Ripe fruit will keep for a day or two in the refrigerator. Do not wash until you are ready to eat or cook them. You can also freeze fruit for future use. Wash fruit and dry well before freezing.

Clean up

At the end of the season, prune out and remove any dead or diseased canes. Also remove canes that are done fruiting. Throw away or burn any plant material to avoid the spread of disease.



Blackberries on a trellis

Jann Knappage, University of Kentucky

Summary

Varieties

Many florican blackberry varieties will grow in Kentucky, such as Apache, Osage, and Triple Crown.

How much to plant

Plant a 10- to 15-foot row of brambles to enjoy fresh fruit for a family.

How and when to plant

Bare-root brambles are planted in early spring.

Pests and diseases

Blackberries can get many diseases and pests. Keep your blackberry bed clean and with good air flow to have fewer problems.

Harvesting

Ripe fruit will easily come off when tugged. Gently pick and place in a container. Refrigerate after picking.

Serving

Blackberries are great fresh or cooked. Gently wash before eating.

Storing

Fresh fruit will keep for a day or two in the refrigerator.

Clean up

Remove any dead or damaged canes and plant material. Throw away or burn.

Glossary

Bramble — a woody vine or shrub in the rose family.

Some are grown for their fruit, such as raspberries and blackberries.

Cane — a woody bramble “shoot.” Many brambles will have thorny canes.

Florican — two-year-old bramble canes that flower and bear fruit.

Primocane — first-year bramble canes. May give fruit in certain varieties.

Authors

Erika Olsen, Extension Associate
Rick Durham, Extension Consumer Horticulture Specialist
Rachel Rudolph, Extension Vegetable Specialist

Contributors

Jann Knappage, Food System Specialist
Rita May, Senior Extension Associate
Michele West, Marketing and Media Specialist
Bethany Pratt, Food System Specialist

Cooperative Extension Service

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