

# Fruit and Nut Review

## BLACKBERRIES

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Wild blackberries are a traditional fruit crop in the South. Home plantings of blackberries offer high-quality fruit and ease of harvesting without the inconvenience of pests (such as poisonous plants, snakes, and ticks). The erect or upright blackberry is the most popular type grown in Mississippi.

Upright blackberries have four-sided canes that may grow 5 to 7 feet high and can stand without support, especially when summer-topped. Erect varieties require less labor and expense since they do not need a trellis system.

### Establishment and Cultural Practices

Blackberries grow on a wide range of soil types. A soil pH of 6.0 to 6.5 is best, but blackberries grow in soils ranging from a pH of 4.5 to 7.5. A deep, fine-sandy-loam soil is ideal, but blackberries grow well in heavier soils if they are well drained.

Establish erect blackberries in late February or early March by planting plants or root cuttings collected from healthy plants. Plant root cuttings that are 4 to 7 inches long and one-eighth to one-half an inch thick (about pencil-size). Plant root cuttings 2 feet apart in rows 10 feet apart for a hedgerow. Place the root cuttings 1 to 2 inches deep in well-prepared soil. Fertilize the plants with 10-10-10 or 13-13-13 one month after planting and again in late June (using 5.5 pounds per 100 feet of row in a 2-foot band).

Increase the fertilizer rate the next year to 11.5 pounds per 100 feet of row applied in February and 5.5 pounds per 100 feet in June. Spread the fertilizer evenly over a 2-foot band. In following years, use 11 pounds of fertilizer per 100 feet in March

and 5.5 pounds of fertilizer per 100 feet of row immediately after harvest, evenly applied over a 3-foot band.

To establish individual plants, place plants or root cuttings about 8 feet apart in well-prepared soil. About one month after planting, sprinkle one-half to one-third a cup of 13-13-13 or 10-10-10 fertilizer in a 2-foot circle around each plant. In June or July, reapply the same amount of fertilizer in a 2½- to 3-foot circle. In following years, apply 1 cup in a 3-foot circle in early March and again in late July.

In the first growing season, canes from erect blackberries will be semierect or almost trailing. Keep them in the row area since they will produce fruit the next year. New canes produced in the second and later years will be erect and need to be cut to a height of 3 to 4 feet in June to encourage lateral branching. Vigorous plants may require topping two to four times. Prune hedgerows to a width of about 3 to 4 feet.

Blackberry canes are biennial. Vegetative canes develop the first year, bear fruit the second year, and die after fruiting. Fruiting canes must be removed after harvest. New canes from the roots will replace these canes. The new canes will have fruit the following year.

Growers sometimes mow plants to ground level immediately after harvest and then dispose of all mowed plant material. A long growing season in southern Mississippi allows time for growth of new canes in summer and fall (to provide for the next crop). Annual mowing for a number of years may weaken the plants. A 2- to 3-year mowing rotation may prove satisfactory. A grower must weigh the benefits of more frequent mowing (less disease problems, less dead canes in a row) versus less frequent mowing (possibly higher yields).

Rosette or double blossom, a fungal disease, is the most significant factor limiting blackberry production in Mississippi. No variety is completely immune to this disease, and it must be controlled by a spray and cultural program.

## Thorny Varieties

**Brazos** - An excellent variety for South Mississippi. Vigorous, erect, thorny canes, high yield, large fruit, insect and disease resistant, and drought tolerant. Somewhat cold sensitive and not suited for North Mississippi.

**Cheyenne** - Vigorous, erect, thorny canes, ripens mid-season, very productive, fruit very large. Excellent for fresh consumption or processing. Excellent flavor.

**Chickasaw** - Released in 1999. Vigorous, erect, thorny canes. Fruit size and yield are larger than Shawnee. Fruit are long, cylindrical, slightly flattened in shape, and very attractive with a glossy, black finish. Postharvest evaluations indicated superior shelf life.

**Kiowa** - Canes are thorny, erect, and self-supporting. Fruit is black, glossy, firm, very large with a high sugar content and excellent flavor. Ripens about the same time as Chickasaw, and harvest season extends about 45 days. Good results in postharvest evaluations.

**Shawnee** - Vigorous, erect, thorny canes; berry size larger than Cheyenne; very productive; ripens about one week later than Cheyenne. Excellent flavor. Excellent for fresh consumption or processing.

## Thornless Varieties

**Apache** - Released in 1999; plant has erect-growing, thornless canes. Fruit is blocky and conical and very attractive with a glossy, black finish. Sugar content is comparable with other varieties and flavor rated very good. Seed size is larger than Arapaho and Navaho.

Fruit size is twice as large as Navaho, and yields are high. Bloom date is between Navaho and Arapaho, and ripening date is later than both varieties but more concentrated. Vigor, health, erectness of cane, and cold-hardiness exceed that of Arapaho and Navaho.

**Arapaho** - Canes are thornless, erect, and self-supporting. Fruit is medium-sized, short and conical, bright, glossy, black with small seeds and medium yields. Sugar content and shelf life are less than Navaho but greater than Shawnee. Ripens about 11 days before Navaho, and harvest period is 4 weeks. Hardy in all areas of Mississippi. Plants easily reproduce from roots.

**Navaho** - Canes are thornless, erect, and self-supporting. Fruit is black and glossy, firm, sweet, and medium in size. Ripens about 7 days after Shawnee; produces for about 1 month and has shown good shelf life. Plants have good hardiness to low temperatures in Mississippi. Navaho plants do not reproduce freely from roots, so a closer spacing is best.

**Ouachita** - Released in 2003; plant has very erect, thornless canes. Fruit is large with very good flavor and high sugar content. Yields are consistently high, producing at the same or higher levels of the other thornless varieties. Ripening begins in early June and continues about 4 weeks. Plants and fruit are relatively disease resistant.

## Harvesting

Blackberries ripen in late May and early June. The varieties listed produce at least one-half a gallon per plant or 2 to 3 tons per acre.

Yields can be as high as 2½ gallons per plant. Blackberries need to be harvested when fully ripe, since they do not ripen after harvest. Usually a variety bears fruit for about 2 weeks. Do not let harvested fruit sit in the sun; refrigerate berries as soon as possible after harvest.