

Blackberries (*Rubus spp.*)

Plant right away. Remove your blackberry plants from their box and plastic liner as soon as possible. You have received disease-free dormant plug-size transplants. Blackberry plants typically hold their leaves, even when dormant, but if your plants have no leaves, that is not cause for alarm. We recommend transplanting outside as soon as possible.

If you are unable to transplant them right away: Check moisture level of plug-cell soil; it should be damp. Place the transplants back inside their box and store in a refrigerator or a cool location for up to 1 week at 32–40°F (0–4°C). Keep plug-cell soil damp.

Blackberries are related to raspberries but unlike raspberries, blackberry fruits retain their core when picked. Many of the blackberries we offer are not very cold-hardy, but we do offer, **Prime Ark® Freedom, Chester, & Ponca** which can be successfully grown in northern areas.

LIFE CYCLE

Perennial. Consult individual variety descriptions for hardiness zones.

PRIMOCANE VS. FLORICANE

Floricanes varieties produce fruit on second-year canes. The plants produce vigorous, green, vegetative canes called primocanes during the first year. These canes then overwinter and harden off, becoming floricanes in their second year. The floricanes then bear fruit on short lateral branches early to mid-summer of the second year before dying back. **Primocane** varieties also produce primocanes in their first year, but unlike floricanes types, these canes are capable of both vegetative growth and fruiting. They form fruit on the tips of the current season's canes, typically producing from late summer into Fall until dying back from a hard frost.

SITE SELECTION

Blackberries thrive in well-drained soil, in a sunny, open location. A slightly sloped plot that encourages good air and water movement is desirable. Many disease and environmental problems can be minimized by planning ahead and planting at an appropriate site. Soil that remains water saturated can lead to winter injury or disease problems. If your site is poorly drained, consider planting in raised beds. A fertile soil with a pH of 6.5–6.8 is optimal.

PLANTING

Adequate spacing is important for best yields. Beds should be 3' wide, with paths a minimum of 8' wide between beds. This spacing allows the plants to fill in the beds as well as allowing room for mowing equipment in the pathways if needed. The paths can be planted with grass or other cover crops, such as clover, or mulched with bark or straw.

Space plants 3–4' apart in the row. Transplant the plugs deeply enough to cover plug soil with ½-1" of garden soil. Irrigate well after transplanting and maintain good moisture levels until plants are well-established or for 4–6 weeks after transplanting.

WEED CONTROL

Weed control for blackberries is very important for optimal yields and plant health. We recommend that you plant your blackberries in an area that has already been tilled and weeded—preferably an area previously planted with a cover crop for suppression of perennial weeds. After planting, cultivate weekly to control weeds while the blackberries are getting established. Mulching with straw or bark is an effective option for controlling weeds, especially during the first year.

PRUNING

Proper pruning of both floricanes and primocane blackberry types is essential to ensuring a successful harvest. Regular pruning encourages the development of lateral branches, greatly increases yields, promotes earlier and more uniform berry

production, and maintains a more manageable plant habit.

Prune each year after the first year (establishment year). Three primary pruning methods are typically used: *tipping*, *standard pruning* and *removal of spent floricanes*.

Tipping (primocane and floricane). Allow new growth to reach 12–15" in height, then remove the top 1" of the canes. This can be accomplished by simply pinching off the tender tips of the canes with your fingers or using clean pruning shears. Tipping promotes lateral branching, resulting in increased fruiting sites and improved canopy structure.

For more vigorous varieties, canes can be tipped a second time once they reach a height of approximately 30" to encourage further lateral branch development.

Standard pruning (primocane only). Allow the plants to become established during their first growing season before implementing standard pruning practices. In late winter to early spring of the following year, anytime after the first of the year in northern climates, prune all canes to within a few inches of ground level. Leave a few inches above ground so you can see where each plant is located, and to avoid mowing or trampling them.

The annual removal of all canes resets growth for a single, concentrated harvest on new season primocanes. Because primocane-fruiting types fruit on current-year growth, cutting canes to the ground during dormancy does not reduce yield.

Note: It is not recommended to perform standard pruning on floricanes-fruiting types, as this would eliminate the developing canes that would bear the next season's fruit.

Removal of spent canes (floricane only). During late winter to early spring, remove all canes that produced during the previous season by cutting them to the ground. These canes, known as spent floricanes, have completed their fruiting cycle and will not produce again. Removing them opens the canopy, improves air circulation, and allows adequate space and light for newly developing primocanes which will produce in the upcoming season.

When pruning, take care not to injure emerging primocanes, as these represent the next year's fruiting wood. Properly disposing of spent canes by either composting them away from the planting area, or burning (where permitted), will help reduce the carryover of disease and overwintering pests.

TRELLISING

A good trellising system can improve yield as well as facilitate harvest and maintenance. For small plantings, a temporary trellis can be erected for use during the fruiting season. Sturdy posts set at the ends of the bed with twine or wire run between the posts will help keep the canes upright.

Trellises for larger plantings should be supported by posts standing 6' above ground, set into the center of the rows, and spaced 25' feet apart. Run twine or wire between the posts at several height intervals (usually about every foot), starting at about 30" above ground level. Train the canes between the wires or attach canes to wires as they grow.

DISEASES AND PESTS

Blackberries are susceptible to a number of pests and diseases. To learn more, see our [Raspberry Pests and Diseases Tech Sheet](#), which also applies to blackberries. Contact your local Cooperative Extension service or a raspberry culture guide for more detailed information.

HARVEST

Primocane varieties will bear a small crop during their first year, with full yields beginning the second year. They typically fruit starting late summer through the fall until hard frost. Floricane varieties will produce fruit early to mid-summer on second year canes. Blackberries for fresh eating are almost always harvested by hand, as they are delicate and do not ripen uniformly enough to machine harvest. Keep berries cool after harvest, and be careful not to crush them. Blackberries can be stored by freezing whole.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

New York State Integrated Pest Management Publication No. 228. 2021. Organic Production and IPM Guide for Raspberries and Blackberries. URL: <https://ecommons.cornell.edu/bitstream/handle/1813/42889.3/2022-org-rasp-blackberry-NYSIPM.pdf> (accessed 01.23.2023).

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