

# Planting Thornless Blackberries

*Blackberries are a diverse group, the majority of which are indigenous to the Northern hemisphere. The first thornless plants were collected some 80 years ago, but only recently have they become widely available. They are hardy, and have an erect habit with large flavorful fruit. These results afford the home gardener a fine choice of unarmed blackberries.*



## 1 choosing & growing

Varieties perform somewhat differently from one locale to the next, so buy locally if possible, and choose cultivars recommended for your area. One thing to be especially mindful of is hardiness. Blackberries are less hardy than raspberries, and the thornless varieties are less hardy than thorny cultivars.

Blackberry roots are perennial, their shoots (or canes) are biennial. Each year new canes arise from the plant's crown. Like other brambles, thornless blackberries perform best in full sun and well-drained soil, but they can handle shade for a portion of the day and are not fussy about soil type. In other words they are adaptable.

Give the plants a good watering before you set the plants out. The spacing depends on their type.

Eradicate the weeds before you plant. Once you have set the plants cultivate shallowly to protect the roots. For the first couple of years, a handful of organic all-purpose fertilizer sprinkled in a 12 inch radius around the base of each plant will encourage good root establishment. After that, a spring application of organic all-purpose fertilizer at the rate of five pounds per 100 feet of row will maintain vigorous growth.

## 2 training & pruning

Trailing and semi-erect varieties need a trellis to support their lengthy canes. The simplest and most satisfactory trellis consists of rot-resistant posts spaced at 15-20 foot intervals along the row. Stretch wires tightly between the posts and secure them with a turnbuckle so that you can take up the slack.

Trellising can be done at the same time you prune, which is during the dormant season. First remove all the old canes (those that produced the past season's crop). Next eliminate any weak or un-healthy looking canes. Next, cut back the laterals, (side shoots) to 12 to 18 inches. Tie the canes individually to the trellis, spreading them equally in both directions on the wires.

## 3 harvesting

Though you may be tempted to pick the berries as soon as the fruit turns black, most cultivars need a couple more days to mature to their best flavor. (An unripe blackberry can be might sour.) When they are fully ripe most berries will come off their stem with only a little prodding.

