

Blackberry Planting Instructions

Selecting a Planting Site

To get the most out of your blackberry planting, choose your site carefully. Blackberries prefer full sunlight and grow best in well-drained, sandy loam soils rich in organic matter. Avoid low areas that remain wet late into the spring, but select a site with access to a water supply. Irrigation is important for good plant growth during dry periods and can improve fruit size and yield. Destroy all wild raspberry and blackberry plants within a distance of 600 feet of your planting site if possible, to reduce the possibility that virus diseases might be spread to your planting.

The Blackberry Plant

The crowns and roots of blackberry plants are perennial, but individual canes live two years. Each spring, the plants produce canes (suckers) from buds on the crown and on underground lateral stems. It's easy to tell first-year canes from second-year canes. First-year canes have green stems, while second-year canes have a thin, brown bark covering them.

Planting and Management Systems

Plant blackberries early in the spring after the danger of severe frost is past (late April to mid-May) or late fall while the soil is still warm. Do not allow plant roots to dry out before or during planting. Plants should be set at the same depth or slightly deeper than they were in the pot. Firm the soil around the roots and water the plants.

Blackberry plants are typically grown in a hedgerow. Crowns should be planted about 2 feet apart in rows that are 8 to 12 feet apart. The plants will soon send up suckers from the roots and crowns to form a hedge, which should be maintained at 12 to 18 inches wide at the base. Individual plants can be grown as a large shrub following the same annual cane pruning used for hedgerow planting.

Blackberries are best grown with some sort of a trellis. This will improve fruit quality, make harvesting easier, and reduce disease problems. Trellises also make pruning simpler by encouraging new cane growth in the middle of the row, rather than just along the outside edges. For plants grown in a hedgerow, the "T" or "V" trellis systems are recommended.

For the T trellis, sturdy posts should be set in the row with 3½-foot-long cross arms affixed at a height of 3½ to 4½ feet. The posts should be set at least two feet deep in the ground and anchored at each end of the row. Secure heavy-gauge wire along the length of the row on each side of the cross arms (Figure 1).

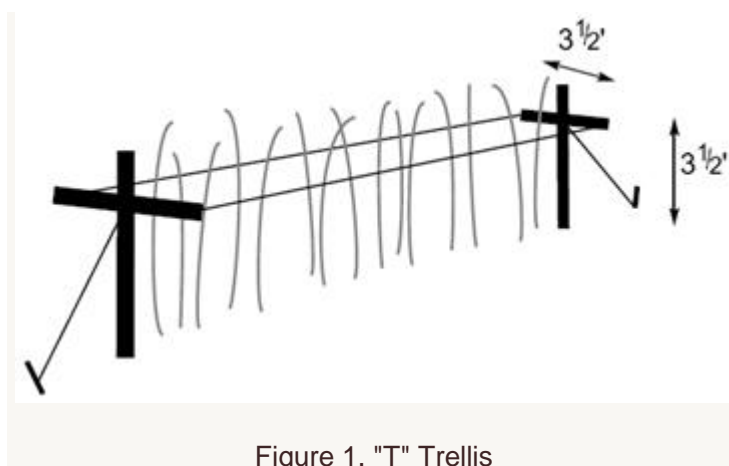


Figure 1. "T" Trellis

For the V trellis, two posts should be set at each end of the row at about a 30-degree angle so that they are 3½ feet apart at a height of 3½ feet. Run the wire from each post at 3½ feet (Figure 2). After pruning, tie the fruiting canes to the wires on each side.

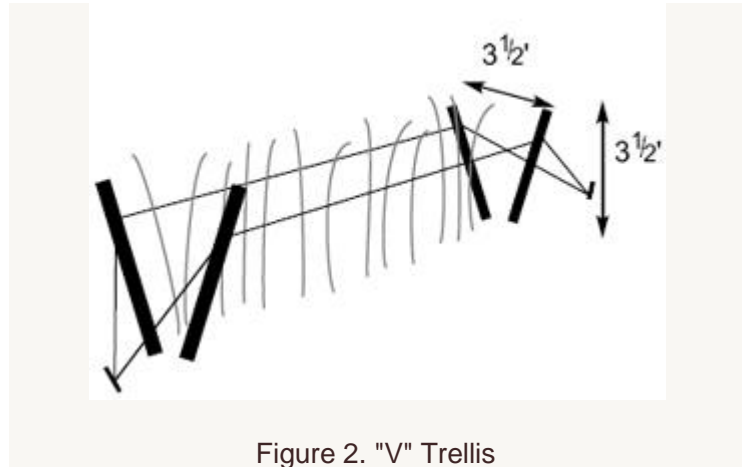


Figure 2. "V" Trellis

Care and Fertilization

Keep the planting free from weeds with shallow cultivation and hand pulling as necessary. Make sure the plants receive one to two inches of water a week for best growth. Mulch can be used to reduce weed problems within the plant rows and also to help retain soil moisture and add valuable organic matter. Spread wood chips, bark, pine needles, or rotted leaf mulch over the plant rows, and maintain it at a depth of three to four inches.

Blackberries should be fertilized each year in the early spring (mid-April). Apply 2 pounds of 10-10-10 (or organic equivalents) per 100 square feet of the planting. It is best to split the application, applying half of the recommended amount in mid-April and the second half four to six weeks later.

Pruning

Pruning is a vital part of maintaining a healthy blackberry planting. This practice greatly inhibits the spread of diseases and improves fruit quality and yield. During the summer months, regularly remove all new canes that emerge outside the desired plant row width of 12 to 18 inches. This improves light penetration and air circulation for the canes in the middle row that will fruit next year. Also remove any canes that show obvious signs of insect or disease injury. Maintaining this narrow row width will assure adequate light penetration and air circulation to promote healthy cane growth and reduce disease problems. Only the most vigorous canes, those with the greatest height and basal diameter, should be left in the row. Continue thinning until only four to five canes per foot of row length remain. These remaining canes should be attached to the trellis wires with twine. Finally, remove all of the plant waste from the field. Plant waste can harbor diseases and insects that may attack the healthy canes.

Harvesting

Blackberries do not separate from the core, so ripeness should be judged by color and taste. To maintain fresh quality, place fruit in shallow containers, no more than three berries deep, and cool the fruit in the refrigerator as quickly as possible. Fruit properly harvested and held at this temperature can maintain fresh quality for three to seven days. If the fruit is to be made into jam or jelly, process it immediately, or freeze it until ready to use.