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Rotating Extension Column
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Blackberries are a Natural for Home Gardeners and Local Sales

The blackberry is an underutilized fruit by both home gardeners and fresh market producers. It is popular for fresh eating, cooking and preserving, and since it doesn't ship well the freshest and best tasting fruit is locally grown.

This crop should be seriously considered by a few farmers who are looking for a niche crop and market. The fact that blackberries are so perishable actually works in favor of the small farmer. Local blackberry growers have a definite advantage since competition from far away large producers would require extra handling and long distance shipping.

Recently developed blackberry cultivars or varieties have resulted in increased interest by gardeners and producers. These are not the blackberries that we grew up picking along roadsides and in neglected fields. Heavy yields of large fruit can be expected from well maintained plantings.

There are three basic groups of blackberry cultivars. Of the early fruiting trailing types, Flordagrand and Oklawaha are recommended. They are heavy bearers, but require trellising. These two are also self unfruitful and should be planted together for cross pollination

The second group includes the later fruiting semi-erect types. Suggested cultivars are Brazos, Cheyenne, Comanche and Cherokee. These are self fruitful, so it is not necessary to plant more than one from this group in an area.

And, we can now also grow thornless blackberries in fields, gardens and landscapes along the northern Gulf Coast. This is due to the availability of Arapaho and Navaho, two releases by the University of Arkansas. They

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have been evaluated and recommended by University specialists in northern Florida, and have been tried by local growers.

They should be planted in alternate rows or alternate plants within each row for cross-pollination. The thornless types have rather specific pruning requirements that are unlike the method described below for the other types. Contact your local Extension Agent or someone experienced in growing Arapaho and Navaho before pruning.

Blackberries are among the easiest fruits to grow. They produce their flowers and fruits on the previous season's growth. These shoots die back at the end of the fruiting season, and new growth which arises from below the ground prior to winter forms the fruiting surface for the next year. This growth is very extensive during our long growing season, permitting the pruning of both old and new growth back to ground level immediately after harvest. This is not the case in areas further north, where growers have the meticulous task of pruning away the old, bearing canes, while leaving the new current season's growth.

A soil test is recommended prior to planting in order to determine the pH and nutrient needs. If the test calls for lime and phosphorus, these two elements should be applied and incorporated prior to planting. Light fertilization of a balanced fertilizer can be used while establishing plants the first year. Mature blackberry vines should receive three applications of a complete fertilizer such as 10-10-10 during the growing season. Apply one third pound of fertilizer per plant, with the first application made in February, the second shortly after harvest, and the third in late August.

Serious blackberry production would also require that they receive supplemental irrigation. Trickle or drip irrigation systems are efficient, relatively low in cost and work well for blackberry plantings as well as many other horticultural crops.

Additional information concerning blackberry production is available at your local Extension office. Computer users can also obtain information online. Go to http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/MG211.

Dan Mullins is the Commercial Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.
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