

Southern Treats in the Summertime

A UNIQUE STYLE OF GARDENING

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One of the greatest things about working in the forestry profession is meeting people that use their land in different ways. This summer I have been introduced to the practice of cultivating blackberry bushes. I'm sure that just about everyone in the South has picked and eaten native blackberries at least once in their lifetime; I know I have. However, the practice of cultivating blackberry bushes is a little bit different than finding a patch of them out in the forest. With the guidance of Dr. Arlie A. Powell, the professor who developed this system, Dr. Finley McRae and his family have been growing blackberries for several years now. And I had the pleasure of learning a little bit about the process.

Native blackberries (*Rubus occidentalis*) grow throughout the Southeast and have many benefits to their name. Not only do they provide soft mast for multitudes of wildlife, they also provide excellent escape cover for small mammals such as cottontail rabbits as well as numerous game and non-game bird species. As

far as human consumption, they are filled with several vitamins including A, C, and E, and have been studied for their antioxidant properties. The native blackberry is also the state fruit of Alabama.

Pre-planting practices are critical in the process of



Dr. Finley McRae encourages berry branches to grow down a trellis by fastening them to the wire.

starting a blackberry trellis and should include site selection as well as soil testing. The site should get plenty of sunlight and be free of any encroaching vegetation. A soil test should also be done to check pH levels and fertility of the soil. Your local Cooperative Extension System office can assist you with the soil testing process.

This practice uses genetically improved varieties of erect blackberries, which include Apache, Arapaho, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Kiowa, Navaho, and Shawnee. Some are thorny while others are not. Several of these varieties can be purchased from specialty nurseries and come in 1-3 gallon containers. A one- or two-wire trellis system is needed to support the plant through the growing process. Trellis wires should be located approximately 2.5-5.5 feet from the ground. A drip irrigation system should also be installed to provide water during the growing months. The McRaes have a one-wire trellis system for one variety and a two-wire trellis system for another variety.

The purpose of growing blackberries with this type trellis system has several reasons. For one, you can regulate moisture content of the soil by using a drip irrigation system. Two, it makes harvesting the fruit much easier. It also makes fertilizing the plants easier, as well as maintaining the trellis and drip irrigation systems.

This practice requires little to no pesticide use. From an aesthetics stand point, the trellises are very pleasant to look at during the flowering and fruiting stages, and could be viewed as an ornamental on any fence.

The Process

After choosing the trellis site and variety of blackberry you want to plant, establish plant rows underneath the bottom wire giving appropriate space for growth, around 3-6 feet. During the



Installing a drip irrigation system provides water during the growing months.

first year of growth, choose the two most upright canes of the plant. Leaving these two canes – known as “primocanes” – remove all other emerging canes from the base of the plant. The two remaining should be straight in form, healthy, and growing vigorously.

When one of the two primocanes reach the bottom wire, it should be topped, leaving about 2-3 inches of primocane above the wire. This will promote branching of the primocane. Once the primocane branches start growing down the wire, lightly fasten them to it. Heavy string or plastic zip ties can be used to hold the branches to the wire. You should continue to tie the primocane down as it grows over summer. Remove all emerging

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A one- or two-wire trellis system, located approximately 2.5-5.5 feet from the ground, is needed to support the plant through the growing process.





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Some genetically improved varieties of blackberries are thorny while others are not.

branches from the primocanes as well. This will focus more growth to the cane for a stronger stem.

As the other primocane of the plant reaches the bottom wire, secure it. Repeat the topping and tying process as performed on the top primocane. These canes will be your main stems for fruit

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production the following year. The following spring, branches will form on the primocanes. The old primocanes are now known as "floracanes."

As the floracanes are going through the flowering and fruit process, new primocanes will emerge from the base of the plants. Use these new primocanes for next year's growing stock. Fruit growth and harvest time usually occurs from late May through late June. After fruit production has ended, remove that season's floracanes from the trellis system. By doing this, it will allow the emerging primocanes to grow through the rest of the summer for the following year's fruit production. After the floracanes are removed, it is suggested that fertilizing and watering the new emerging primocanes will help the growth tremendously. Repeat the growing and training process over again.

It has been very educational for me to learn about cultivating blackberries and believe me, the varieties I tasted are great. If you are interested in growing blackberries yourself, information can be found on the internet or contact your local Cooperative Extension System office for information. 🌱

Photography by Colin McRae

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