

You Can Grow Blackberries

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One of the Gulf Coast's best adapted fruit species begins to ripen in May and early June. Blackberries are so well adapted that wild plants are found growing naturally in old fields, along roadsides and on ditch banks. Southern plant breeders have long recognized the potential for this fruit and as a result, we now have superior cultivars for commercial use and for planting in the home landscape.

Adapted blackberry cultivars, once established and well-maintained, bear heavy crops. Flordagrind and Oklawaha are recommended trailing types. They must both be included in a planting to ensure good pollination. Brazos is a semi-erect or bush type that is also recommended.

Brazos has two major advantages over many other blackberry cultivars. It is a semi-erect type that does not require trellising and pruning is also simpler than with other cultivars. The tops of Brazos can be cut low or even mowed down as soon as the harvest season has passed. If cut back at the right time, plants regenerate enough to bear the following spring. With most other cultivars, pruning is somewhat tedious in that two year old canes must be removed each year, leaving only one year old canes.

The production of blackberries on thornless plants is now possible in the deep South. Navaho and Arapaho are two thornless cultivars. Both will produce under Gulf Coast conditions and the fruit of Arapaho appears to have longer shelf life than most other blackberries.

Research at the University of Arkansas has yielded several other outstanding blackberry cultivars. They have also been given American Indian names such as Cherokee and Choctaw. Most of these are vigorous thorny plants, but they bear extra heavy crops of large berries.

The blackberry is perhaps the most underused among all of the fruit species that are adapted to the Gulf Coast. There are many ways of incorporating a planting into the home landscape. Obviously they can be planted in a widely spaced row layout similar to that used by commercial producers. Less formal arrangements can also be incorporated to take advantage of a particular piece of property. Blackberry hedges or mass plantings established where there is ample sunlight can provide plenty of fruit for home consumption.

Blackberries are also excellent plants for attracting and keeping wildlife on your property. Many species of birds and mammals find shelter and food in a blackberry patch. The habit of growth and density of these plants is also ideal as nesting sites for song birds.

Anyone who is interested in establishing some blackberries in the landscape should do some homework. Seek out local growers who sell fruit of these new cultivars and taste. Better yet, make a cobbler.

Locate sources of plants for planting in late winter or early spring. With only a few exceptions, blackberry

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plants are mostly sold by nurseries specializing in them.

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