It’s time to plant brambles and blueberries

Source: Shawn Wright, specialist, UK Department of Horticulture

If you’ve been thinking about growing small fruit this year, whether for personal use or for sale at a farmers market, now is the time to start scouring nursery catalogs or visit local nurseries.

Raspberries and blackberries, commonly called brambles, grow well in Kentucky, as do highbush blueberries. With favorable growing conditions and proper care, a raspberry planting may produce for eight to 12 years. Blackberry plants usually live longer than raspberries, because they are better adapted to Kentucky’s climate. They both have biennial canes and perennial roots. The roots and crowns live for a number of years and each spring produce a new crop of canes, while the fruit matures on last season’s canes.

Deep, fertile soil that is well drained, high in humus and free from hard pans is best for brambles. However, almost any well-drained soil can be modified to grow brambles. Planting brambles on raised beds may help reduce root rot and prolong the life of the planting. Trickle irrigation and mulching will help ensure good plant growth and high yield. When possible, plant brambles on a northern slope or where there is afternoon shade. Such soils are cooler and hold moisture better.

Early spring is also a good time to plant blueberries. Plant along a north-south axis if possible, so sunlight is more uniformly distributed. Recommended planting distances for blueberries are 10-14 feet between rows and 4-6 feet within rows. At this distance, plants will eventually form a shrub row. Some varieties of blueberries are also easily adapted to container planting for the home gardener who has limited space, but still wants to grow small fruit.

You can purchase blueberry plants as either dormant, bare root plants or as potted plants. Make planting holes several inches larger and deeper than the root system. Research has shown that blueberry plants set in deeper, narrower holes produce more fruit. It is thought that plants with a deeper root system experience less drought stress.

Remember to purchase certified, virus-free stock when possible. Here are a few suggestions that work well in Kentucky soils.

Canby is a June-bearing red raspberry variety that produces early, large, flavorful fruit. Plants may be a little cold tender. Plants are nearly thornless and are resistant to mosaic virus. It is recommended for home and commercial plantings.

Reveille, an early-season raspberry cultivar with excellent color and quality, produces large fruit. Plants are very winter hardy and tolerate fluctuating spring temperatures. It is too soft for commercial use, but its size and earliness make it excellent for home use or U-pick and roadside sales.

Other suitable red raspberry cultivars for Kentucky include Citadel, Latham, Liberty and Titan.

Among erect and semi-erect thornless blackberry cultivars that work well in Kentucky are Natchez, Apache, Osage, Ouachita, Triple Crown, Prime-Ark Traveler, Stark and Black Gem. Several of the latter are susceptible to spotted wing fruit fly infestations.

Good cultivars of thorny blackberries are Chickasaw, Kiowa and Prime-Ark 45, the latter of which is susceptible to spotted wing drosophila.

Among blueberries, Duke, Patriot, Bluejay, Bluecrop, Draper, Chandler, Brigitta, Bluegold, Ozarkblue, Nelson, Darrow and Elliott are good bearing cultivars. To ensure good pollination, plant two varieties.

For more information about growing small fruit, contact the (COUNTY NAME) office of the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service.

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