

Blackberries

Introduction

Blackberries are included in the group of small fruits generally referred to as ‘brambles.’ They have perennial crowns and roots that produce biennial canes. The canes bear fruit the second year and then die naturally after harvest. Blackberries are grouped according to their growth habit: erect, semi-erect and trailing. The trailing types are not recommended for commercial production in Kentucky due to their lack of winter hardiness. Erect (thorny and thornless) and semi-erect (thornless) blackberries, however, grow and yield well in most parts of the state. With favorable growing conditions, a planting may produce for 12 or more years.

Marketing

Blackberries in Kentucky have been traditionally sold on the farm as U-pick. Future market growth, however, will come through fresh berry sales in local produce outlets, such as farmers markets, roadside stands, and through local retailers. Blackberry growers in western Kentucky have successfully sold berries at wholesale price levels through the Fairview Produce Auction. There are also several small in-state companies that may purchase blackberries for processing.

Market Outlook

The continued demand for high quality, locally produced berries offers promise for producers willing to invest the time and capital into further developing Kentucky’s blackberry market. Producers located near population centers will



have the added marketing edge. Producers may also investigate supplying fruit to jam producers as part of their total marketing plan. Blackberry fruits do not store or ship well, limiting the market area, but increasing the demand for local, high quality fruit.

Production Considerations

Site selection and planting

The site should be selected the year before planting in order to allow time for adequate preparation. A well-drained, deep fertile soil, high in humus and free from hard pans is best for blackberries. When possible, plant brambles on a northern slope or where there is afternoon shade. Blackberries should not follow solanaceous vegetables (such as tomatoes and peppers), strawberries or other bramble crops for 3 to 4 years. Irrigation is essential for commercial production, and beehives are needed to ensure adequate pollination.

Certified virus-free stock, particularly tissue cultured plants, are highly recommended for early spring planting. The distance between plants and rows varies depending on the type of blackberry, training method and the size of farm equipment. Blackberries are a high maintenance crop, requiring spring pruning and training, as well as the removal of dead fruiting canes from the



previous season. Semi-erect cultivars must be supported on trellises, while erect cultivars may not require trellising, depending on soil fertility. The trellis should be constructed either before planting or during the first season.

Pest management

Common disease problems include anthracnose, crown gall, orange rust, rosette, fruit rots, sterility, and several other viruses. Mites, cane and crown borers, aphids, green June beetles and Japanese beetles can also cause damage to blackberries. Good weed control is very important and can be accomplished with cultivation, mulching and/or herbicides.

Harvest and storage

Ripe berries should be picked regularly, at least twice per week. More frequent harvests will be necessary during the peak of the season and under hot, rainy conditions. Berries are placed directly into the marketing container as they are picked. Cooling within a half hour of harvest is recommended.

Labor requirements

Production and harvest labor hours vary depending on the age of the planting and the type of blackberry being grown. Six to ten pickers are needed per acre for harvest, although additional pickers are often required at the height of the season. U-pick operations will generally need approximately 300 customers to harvest an acre of erect blackberries, and about 450 customers for semi-erect.

Economic Considerations

There is a significant startup cost, demanding management and a time lapse of more than two years after establishment before a full blackberry crop can be harvested. Initial investments include land preparation, purchase of plants, plant establishment, and installation of an irrigation system. The cost of a cooler, which is essential to berry production, should also be included. In

addition, semi-erect thornless blackberries will require a trellis system.

UK estimated five-year return to land, labor and management figures for grower-harvested blackberries are as follows: \$5,372 (thorny erect), \$5,268 (thornless semi-erect) and \$3,244 (thornless erect). Producers marketing U-Pick blackberries can reduce their handling and harvesting costs by \$0.60 or more per quart, a savings that can potentially double annual returns to land, labor, and management.

More Information

- Blackberry Marketing Fact Sheet (University of Kentucky, 2005)
<http://www.uky.edu/Ag/NewCrops/blackberry2005.pdf>
- Blackberry Packaging and Produce Auction Prices (University of Kentucky, 2000)
<http://www.uky.edu/Ag/NewCrops/bbpackage.html>
- Growing Blackberries and Raspberries in Kentucky, HO-15 (University of Kentucky, 2005)
<http://www.ca.uky.edu/agc/pubs/ho/ho15/ho15.pdf>
- Kentucky Blackberry Cost and Return Estimates, ID-149 (University of Kentucky, 2001)
<http://www.ca.uky.edu/agc/pubs/id/id149/id149.pdf>
- Brambles – Production Management and Marketing Bulletin, B-782 (Ohio State, 1999)
<http://ohioline.osu.edu/b782/index.html>
- Midwest Commercial Small Fruit and Grape Spray Guide, ID-94 (Midwest Fruit Workers, 2007)
<http://www.hort.purdue.edu/hort/ext/sfg/>
- Midwest Small Fruit Pest Management Handbook, B-861 (Ohio State, 2004)
<http://ohioline.osu.edu/b861/index.html>
- Organic Culture of Bramble Fruits (ATTRA, 2003)
<http://www.attra.org/attra-pub/bramble.html>
- Raspberries and Blackberries, MF-270 (Kansas State University, 1998)
<http://www.oznet.ksu.edu/library/hort2/samplers/MF720.asp>