

How to grow blackberries

Blackberries and hybrids like loganberries and tayberries are a wonderful choice, producing lots of fruit with very little fuss.

Varieties we love

A far cry from their brambly, wild hedgerow cousins, modern blackberries are really rather civilised, coming in a range of varieties to suit every gardener. From big, bold and vigorous to compact, thornless and delicate, take your pick of the crop.

Loch Ness

A very popular thornless variety that produces lots of big, glossy berries that ripen from late summer until the first frosts.

Silvan

A heavy-cropping blackberry with large fruits that ripen from mid- to late-summer, this one's vigorous and thorny, so it'll need sturdy supports.

Oregon Thornless

A pretty variety with ornamental leaves, delicate white flowers and thornless stems.

For something a bit different, how about trying hybrids like loganberries, tayberries or boysenberries? A mixture of blackberries, raspberries and other berries, they'll make an interesting addition to the garden and tend to bear fruit earlier in the season – usually around July and August.



Prepare

Blackberries are probably the most easy-going of all the soft fruits, thriving almost anywhere in the garden, even in partial shade, but for the best crop, choose a sunny, sheltered spot with rich, free-draining soil.

Prepare the bed by clearing out any weeds and dig in compost or well-rotted farmyard manure to improve the soil structure. Apply 100g per square metre of general purpose fertiliser on top of the soil before planting, to give your plants an extra boost.

Plant

Blackberries can be planted any time between November and March, as long as the ground's not frozen or waterlogged.

The best time to plant crowns is November or December, during the dormant period, but they can also be planted in spring. Plant the crowns with the top bud just below the surface of the soil.

Bare-rooted blackberry canes – which, as the name suggests, are sold with their roots exposed ready for planting – are available from October to March, and, depending on which variety you go for, will grow quite happily in a bed or a container.

Before you buy your canes, take a good look at the roots and make sure you'll be able to separate them out easily. If they're too matted together or tangled, they're likely to get damaged when you plant them.

Some blackberry cultivars need a lot of space – up to 2.5m between plants, so check the labels or look them up online to find out how far apart to space your plants. Plant so that the roots are covered with around 8cm (3in) of soil, and gently tread down the soil to secure the plant.

If you're short on space, a compact, thornless blackberry like Loch Ness will be perfectly happy growing in a good-sized container.

Care

Blackberries are the easiest to grow of all the soft fruits, but there are still a few things to bear in mind once they're planted.

Feeding

While the blackberries are dormant in March, give the soil a feed with some general fertiliser. Water it in, then add a layer of mulch (manure or compost) to keep the roots cool and moist and ward off any weeds.

Once the berries start appearing in summer, some high potassium feed will help them along.

During dry spells, keep your blackberries well-watered but try and avoid getting the stems too wet.

Training

To keep your blackberry plants growing skyward, it's wise to give them some kind of frame to climb. They'll grow quite happily over archways, up trellises and against walls with wires strung across, but posts and wires are the best option for training. Not only will it give the plants a bit more space, it'll be easier to prune them and – most importantly – to spot and pick the berries come harvest time.

Drive a wooden post into each end of the bed, then string a lengths of galvanised wire between the two. Gently attach the canes with some garden twine.

Once they're heading in the right direction, there are a couple of ways of training that will help you to distinguish between new canes, canes that haven't fruited yet and those that have.

Rope training

This is the simplest way to train blackberries and makes it easy to keep track of your canes. Train new canes off to one side along the wires, then after harvesting, remove old canes and train new ones in their place. That way you'll always know which are old, current and new.

Fan training

If you want to try something more advanced, fan training gives high yields but it can be hard work and is really only suited to less vigorous varieties.

Train new canes vertically and along the top wire, leaving fruiting canes fanned out on either side. Once you've harvested all the berries, remove these canes, leaving space for the central ones to be spread out for next year.

Pruning

As soon as you've harvested all the fruit in autumn, cut back old canes to keep them neat and tidy for winter. To keep your blackberries in tip top condition, head back out with the secateurs in spring to snip off any shoots that have been damaged by frost. That way your plants will be able to focus their energy on the strongest, healthiest shoots when the weather warms up.



Pests and diseases

Birds love blackberries, so to make sure there's some fruit left for you come harvest time, keep them well-protected under a fruit cage or cover the plants with fine-gauge bird netting. Remember to wait until the flowers have been pollinated and the fruit starts to appear, or you'll also be blocking out all the bees and other useful insects. If you live in the countryside watch out for deer they love the sweetness of the new growth.

'Blackberry cane spot' causes grey patches on canes which can sometimes spread to the leaves. If the spots grow too much, they can split the cane which will eventually die off. If you spot any infected shoots, cut them right back to ground level.

Harvest

Blackberries produce fruit on last year's canes between July and September and picking time is usually in August and September.

Once you've finished harvesting, cut back all the canes that have borne fruit right down to ground level, and tie in any new canes that have been produced during the year, as these will bear fruit next year.









Growing calendar

	Plant												Harvest											
	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	July	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	July	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
																								
																								

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