



## Blackberries, Dewberries and Days of Future Cobbler

by Carol Seminara, HCMG

Late one August, husband Joe and I drove up U.S. 1 along the Pacific coast heading for Victoria, Canada. Passing through Oregon we encountered magnificent rocky sea vistas, literate traffic signs (“Entering Roadway Merge”), and abundant stands of blackberries growing wild alongside the roads.

Blackberries grow in such dense profusion that the Oregon highway department regularly mows down the canes lest they encroach upon the road, impeding traffic. Indeed, most of the blackberries commercially grown in the U.S. come from the Pacific Northwest, specifically Oregon, California and Washington.

The sight of so much plump, juicy fruit was thrilling. I immediately decided we needed to exchange our lodging for something with a kitchenette so I could make jam. Prudence and a lack of canning equipment prevailed so I surrendered my share of blackberries to the elk who shared my enthusiasm.

Along with peaches and pecans, I consider blackberries one of the defining tastes of the Hill Country. Blackberries are easy to grow, well suited to most regions of Texas, relatively disease- and bug-free, cold-hardy to 5°F and produce up to 8 to 10 pounds of delicious berries per plant. And I’ve never tried to raise them.

Since there’s no time like the present, I visited the local nursery one recent, optimistically warm day and bought three blackberry and two dewberry gallon-size plants. Visions of my soon-to-be bumper crop danced in my head as we ... okay, as Joe spent the next two days turning our naturally occurring adobe brick into organic-rich, workable soil.

Joe’s work was not for naught. Blackberries prefer to grow in soil that’s at least 12-inches deep and that has been amended with lots of organic material, although they will grow in a wide range of soil types as long as there’s good drainage. Container plants can be transplanted all year long, but early spring is the ideal time.

Blackberries, sometimes colloquially called “brambles,” are part of one of the most diverse groups of flowering plants — the genus *Rubus*, which has 12 subgenera, some with hundreds of species. Blackberries are members of the Rosaceae family and are closely related (in a taxonomical way) to strawberries. Blackberries (*Rubus* spp.) are characterized by their growing habit: trailing, erect and semi-erect. They are also classified as either thorny or thornless.

Blackberries are native to Asia, Europe, North America and South America, and have been cultivated in Europe for more than 2,000 years for food, medicinal purposes and as protective hedges. Blackberries propagate by sprouts or suckers from the roots. Dewberries are a trailing or prostrate type of blackberry with slender canes that will root if they come in contact with the soil (a characteristic called strike root – one of mine had!)

Plant blackberries about three feet apart in full sun (at least 10 hours a day). Trailing varieties require support and should be trained on wires, fences or trellises.

All brambles produce aggregate fruits, which means the berries are formed by a collection or aggregation of several smaller fruits called drupelets. Generally, thorny upright blackberries have a strong, sometimes tart flavor while the prostrate varieties are milder tasting. Over the past several decades, plant breeders have worked to develop thornless varieties with full-flavored fruit.

Blackberries are biennial, which means that although their roots are perennial, the shoots or canes produce only leaves their first year of growth and do not bear fruit until the second year. The first-year canes are called “primocanes” and should be allowed to grow to 36- to 48-inches, then topped to encourage branching. The second year, these now one-year-old canes will flower (thus becoming “floricanes”) and develop fruit. The floricanes will die after they have produced fruit and should be pruned out.

New primocanes will emerge from the ground in spring and should be allowed to grow until in their second year when, as floricanes, they produce berries. To prevent inadvertently pruning out the wrong canes, one Master Gardener recommended applying a patch of bright paint to the bottom of new primocanes at the end of growing season as a way to identify next year’s floricanes.

While most blackberry cultivars do not require outside help with pollination, their white or pinkish flowers are attractive to honey bees. Blackberry fruit develops in about 40-70 days, and the plants produce fruit for six to seven weeks. Blackberries usually begin ripening in late May and peak in June.

Blackberries require regular, consistent watering to thrive and produce fruit. Water new transplants daily for the first few weeks after planting, reducing this amount to two or three deep waterings weekly through fall. When plants are dormant in winter, they should be watered every other week.

Mulching with compost or straw is recommended to conserve moisture, moderate soil temperatures and help control emerging weeds.

Recommended upright thorny blackberry cultivars include: Brazos, Rosborough, Womack, Choctaw, Brison and Kiowa. Good upright thornless cultivars include Apache, Arapaho and Navaho.

Blackberries are high in vitamin C and make darn tasty jams, jellies, pies and cobblers. I guess I’ll have to wait until next year to harvest my own berries.