

Brambles (*Rubus* sp.)
By Gary Micsky

Rubus species (e.g. Blackberry, Raspberry, etc.) are a potentially lucrative agroforestry crops which could fill an income niche for many forest landowners. Considering the fact that native plants often appear in the natural succession following timber harvest activities, it is logical to believe they can be incorporated into agroforestry activities and conditions which mimic what is occurring in the wild. What's more, these fruits can be expected to yield a salable crop in their second growing season and generally require only a modest investment in planting stock.

Aside from the appealing sweet taste of the fruit which has been enjoyed since antiquity, recent medical evidence of the healthful benefits of these fruits is certain to increase demand with consumers.

Brambles¹

Brambles are defined as any species belonging to the *Rubus* genus. This covers a large number of plants found growing in the woods and fields surrounding us. Practically speaking, however, the brambles of concern to the home gardener are raspberries (red, black, and purple), blackberries (thornless and thorny), and some of the recently developed hybrids, such as tayberries.

Brambles are, in some ways, the perfect home garden plant. They are relatively easy to grow, requiring little more than a patch of full sun and some well-drained soil. They are highly perishable or often unavailable commercially, so the home planting assures a supply of this delicious treat.

Plants belonging to the *Rubus* genus typically have perennial roots with shoots that are biennial. This means that the shoots (called "canes") grow vegetatively in the first growing season, go through a dormant season, then leaf out, flower, fruit, and die during the second growing season.

Raspberries and blackberries are the two most common bramble crops. Red, black, and purple raspberries are the three most commonly grown raspberry types. The word "type" is used intentionally, because the differences among them include not only the color of the fruit, but also the growth habit (and hence the cultural practices), disease problems, and other characteristics.

Germplasm Sources and Propagation

For **raspberries**, virus-indexed tissue-cultured plants should be planted in the early spring. Raspberries *should not* be planted in poorly drained soils or after any of the *Verticillium*-susceptible crops (tomatoes, potatoes, peppers, eggplant, strawberries). If available, use tissue-cultured blackberries as well; however, dormant canes may also be planted.

In-row spacings (spaces between the plants) are as follows: red raspberries, 24 inches; black raspberries, 30 inches; purple raspberries, 36 inches; blackberries, 36 inches. Between-row spacings should be no less than 8 feet, although the spacing depends on the size of the equipment that will be used to maintain the planting. Between rows, allow at least 4 feet more than the width of the widest implement to be used in the planting. Remove flower blossoms in the first year to encourage plant establishment.

¹ The following information was taken from:
Penn State Small Fruits Production Guide
Available on-line at: <http://ssfruit.cas.psu.edu/>

Eastern blackberries can be thorny and erect, or thornless and trailing. Thornless types are much more cold sensitive (to 0°F) and can be grown only in the southern or warmer portions of Pennsylvania. Because of their trailing growth habit, they require trellising. Thorny types often have excellent fruit quality, but the thorns are brutal. Generally, thorny types of blackberries will tolerate temperatures to about -5°F. They do not require trellising.

Harvest Methods

Brambles, like all small fruit crops, should be harvested in the morning after the dew has dried. This allows a minimum of field heat buildup in the fruit and will result in longer shelf life. Ripe berries will detach easily. They should be rolled off the plant, rather than squeezed or pulled, and put in one-half pint containers. Larger containers result in the crushing of berries in the lower layers.

Raspberries are notorious for their poor shelf life. To maximize shelf life, maintain good disease control in the field and pick berries in the morning after the dew has dried, but before field heat can build up in the berry. Do not allow overripe berries to remain on the canes. Refrigerate berries immediately. They can be kept for up to a week under these conditions. Blackberries should be handled similarly, although blackberry shelf life is several days longer than that of raspberries.