



Urban Harvest

Growing gardens. Enriching lives.

## The Garden Candy Store: Winter is the Time to Plant Blackberries

Bob Randall

In some ways, I find winter the most exciting time in my garden. The reason is that, January, February, and March are the best months for planting perennial fruits—trees like apples and grapefruit, bushes like pomegranates and figs, vines like grapes, and canes like blackberries. If over the years you have added a wide variety of fruits to your landscape, you can pick something sweet and nutritious every month, nearly every year. Your yard can therefore be a sort of candy store without much cost either to your bank account or your health. If you haven't yet planted any, January is the time to get started and if like me you already have a yard full, January is the time to add a few more wherever there's room.

### How To Get Good Ones

What should you plant and where do you get them? Perennials need to survive many years in our challenging conditions—torrential rains, hard freezes, tropical storm winds, and hot summer dry spells, with lots of insects and diseases. So only buy varieties that have been proven by local specialists. Fruits as well need to be productive every year at an early age, and should to be delicious. It's also nice if they are easy to care for and beautiful landscape plants.

Some varieties are sold at the better locally owned nurseries, and some are available by mail, but to really get a selection, you need to visit one or more of the fruit tree sales all over Metro Houston. Urban Harvest's is the largest in the nation is held in early January. There are usually other sales in Harris County, and at Montgomery, Galveston, and Ft. Bend County Extensions at the same time. At many of these, there will be a free 55-minute class before the sale about what's available. These sales occur whatever the weather, with best selections early in the day and on bad weather days when fewer people show up.

### Blackberries

There is much to be appreciated in all of the fruits mentioned above, but since I teach blackberries and staff the blackberry aisle at the sale next Saturday, I might as well tell you why I like them and how to grow them. Blackberries are by far the most productive April May fruit. Although strawberries, blueberries, and loquats all have their place in the landscape, none compare well. Blueberries and strawberries are unproductive without lots of work, and the improved loquats produce only in our warmest locations.

Blackberries, by contrast, are one of the most reliable and productive fruits you can grow. One \$3 plant can easily produce a gallon of berries each year for many years, and the fruit preserve easily. 1

cup of blackberries contains 7.2 grams of cancer and weight reducing fiber—more fiber than any vegetable or non-tropical fruit. Blackberries are classified as upright or trailing and thorny or thornless. Although thornless is certainly desirable, none do well in our area.

If you have lived in Texas a long time, you are probably familiar with the delicious but tiny wild dewberry. This is a classic example of a trailing bramble. Trailing brambles are a maintenance nightmare in our area. They get easily overgrown with weeds. As well, dewberries are tiny, so take a lot of work to eat. There are dewberry-like hybrids: Youngberry and Boysenberry that are larger than dewberries and exceptionally flavorful, but they also trail and unfortunately get a lot of diseases here, so are not very productive.

Much better are the uprights. Many of you will have tasted the old time variety Brazos that produces much larger berries but is unfortunately both sour and big seeded. Brazos is reliably productive, makes great pie or cobbler, and if picked as with all blackberries, when the surface flesh softens and dulls slightly, a little sweet. Just slightly better are more recent improvements, Brison and Rosbrough.

Happily, the University of Arkansas has released many new blackberry varieties, and one of them Kiowa does well enough all over our area to warrant our strongest endorsement. It has berries that are much sweeter than any of the traditional uprights, has smaller seeds, has much larger fruit (see picture), and is exceptionally disease resistant. Last spring, I actually had to cut one in order to get it in my mouth!

### Care

Blackberries will grow in nearly any well-drained soil, prefer heavy mulches, and fruit in sun and part shade. To make picking easy, they are best planted where they can be reached from all sides. Tie the berries upright to a metal stake so that tall weeds do not bury the plants, and so fruit will be easy to pick without drawing blood. Most importantly, berries need to be carefully watered the first summer.

Unless pruned, blackberries can become a thicket quickly, and a worst nightmare for someone weeding. Such thickets protect rodents, so they attract snakes that eat them. There are several ways to avoid this.

First, fruit grows on canes that grew last summer, and these will die this year after they bear. New canes grow from the ground. Therefore, to avoid thickets, prune out dying canes every year in June. This takes about 30 minutes per year per plant.

As the summer progresses, keep an eye on the plants. When they get to four or five feet pinch or cut the growing tip so that the plant branches. Keep any side branches to about 18 inches.

If you follow these simple steps, you will have some candy in your candy store.

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