

Bramble Production Basics

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A commercial raspberry planting requires a lot of planning, attention and labor. Failure in any of these areas will likely jeopardize its success. People who start raspberry plantings often do not fully consider the true costs and potential pitfalls this crop entails. However, those who have, and also possess good management skills, have found that raspberries can be a very profitable, albeit demanding crop. Some basic requirements for success are reviewed below.

Choosing a site

Site selection is critical to successful raspberry production. The wrong choice will generate chronic problems which, at the very least, will tax management skills and reduce profits, and may result in a failure of the planting.

A good raspberry site should have an excellent soil. It must be well drained. A site that holds too much water will reduce the vigor of the plants and greatly increase the probability of *Phytophthora* root rot infection. Avoid soils heavy with clay. A sandy loam with acceptable levels of organic matter (2% or higher) will provide the greatest chance of success. The site should receive full sunlight and have good air circulation. This will encourage a dry microclimate within the planting to reduce the incidence of fungal diseases.

Preparing the soil

Have the soil tested to determine what amounts of nutrients need to be added to encourage optimum growth of raspberries. Applications of lime, to adjust the soil pH to 5.8 to 6.5, and fertilizers should be made according to soil test recommendations. Prior to planting, organic matter levels can be increased by incorporating compost, animal manures and/or plowing down cover crops. The use of cover crops prior to planting can also be an effective technique to reduce weeds and improve the nutrient status of the soil. Cover cropping should be carried out for at least two years to effectively reduce weed populations and improve soil conditions.

Varieties

Selecting the appropriate varieties for your site and markets is a critical component of long-term success. The most important selection criterion in New England is winter hardiness. Relatively few of the varieties available have adequate hardiness to dependably survive the winters in this region. Ripening season, fruit quality, yield potential and disease resistance are other characteristics that should be considered. To extend the harvest season, growers often grow a combination of early, mid and late-season ripening varieties, and may include a primocane fruiting or everbearing variety to extend the season into the fall. Recommended varieties for New England include: *Early* - Prelude, Boyne, Killarney, Reveille; *Midseason* - Nova, Newburgh, Latham; *Late* - Taylor, Encore; *Everbearing* - Fall Red, Polana, Autumn Bliss, Autumn Britten, Caroline.

Pruning

Pruning should be given special attention. Every season, regularly prune out any first year canes that emerge outside of the desired one and a half foot row width. This opens up the planting to encourage growth of the other first year canes, which are setting fruit buds for the next season. Dormant pruning should be left until the late winter or early spring. All canes that fruited the previous summer should be pruned out. Any canes that are outside of the desired row width or showing signs of insect or disease injury should also be pruned out. Only the most vigorous canes, those with the greatest height and basal diameter, should be left in the row. Thinning should continue until the desired cane density of four to five canes per foot of row length is attained. The remaining canes should be attached to the trellis wires. Finally, all of the prunings should be removed from the field. These may harbor diseases and insects that may attack the healthy canes.

Everbearing Raspberries

Consider putting part of your planting into everbearing (primocane fruiting) varieties. These will bear a crop on first year canes in the late summer. The canes can then simply be mowed down late in the winter, eliminating the need for selective pruning. This technique also nullifies the danger of winter injury to the canes and may reduce the threat of several diseases and insects that use the canes as over-wintering sites. Although this practice also eliminates the conventional second year crop from two-year-old canes, many growers prefer this method to reduce labor and risk while still providing profitable yields. Allow plants to become established for at least three years before beginning to mow them. This will allow the plants time to establish a healthy root system and reduce stress caused by mowing. Most everbearing varieties mature their fall crop late in the season, making it susceptible to frost. Select varieties that can successfully mature the primocane crop in your area. Early maturing varieties include Polana, Fall Red, August Red, Jaclyn, Caroline, Autumn Bliss and Autumn Britten.

Pest Management

It is critical that raspberry growers become familiar with the major pest species that effect their crop, including insects, diseases and weeds, and know what management options are available for each. Weeds and diseases are two of the most common reasons for the failure of raspberry plantings. A grower should be well aware of the pest situation in the planting at all times through frequent and regular monitoring. Information on pest management is available in the New England Small Fruit Pest Management Guide, which can be purchased through your state University Extension or online at <http://www.umass.edu/fruitadvisor/nesfpmg/index.htm>.

Marketing

Demand for raspberries is typically high. However, because the fruit are very perishable and the labor required to harvest them is expensive and often difficult to find, getting good quality berries to market at a price that brings a fair profit is often difficult. While “pick-your-own” marketing can greatly reduce harvest labor, it will probably not suffice as the only marketing channel. Fresh, pre-picked fruit can be sold through stands and farmers markets, as well as to local restaurants, schools, and groceries. However, care must be taken with picked fruit to ensure good post harvest fruit quality through proper and careful picking, packing, storing and transportation practices.

In the end, it is the growers who take the time to educate themselves thoroughly in raspberry production, pest management, and business management who will be successful. This education should begin well before a plant is put in the ground and never stop.