

Key Features for Organic Berry Crop Production

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Berry production by whatever means is challenging. One has to be good at horticulture, pest management, labor management and marketing to be successful. Producing berries organically is even more challenging. One could debate endlessly the keys to successful organic berry production. In the opinion of this writer, 90% of the groundwork for organic production is laid before and during the planting year – not after the plants are established.

No matter if you are growing conventionally or organically, ensuring that the site you select has good internal drainage is absolutely critical for the planting to sustain any sort of reasonable production over time. This is particularly true for raspberries, but even blueberries will not thrive where the soil is poorly drained. If the soil is poorly drained and you cannot locate elsewhere, then install subsurface drainage or plant on raised beds. There is nothing that can rescue declining plants from wet, saturated soils and the associated pathogens.

Another critical step for successful organic berry production is ensuring relatively weed-free fields at planting. This includes weed seeds and viable root pieces. Once berry plants are established, controlling weeds is difficult. However, if berry plants establish first, then it is more difficult for weeds to compete. It is not unreasonable to cultivate and plant successive cover crops for two or three years prior to planting berries. The investment in weed management prior to planting will pay dividends later on. After planting, the use of mulch can impede weed establishment, and in most cases, benefits berry plant growth as well.

Proper nutrition is also a key to success, especially since many sources of organic fertilizers are slow to release their nutrients. Building nutrient reserves when appropriate (according to soils test recommendations) with amendments and compost before planting can help plant establishment significantly. Also, it is critical that the soil is the proper pH prior to planting. Many growers do not acidify the soil adequately for blueberries, nor do they raise the pH to sufficient levels for raspberries. This compromises the ability of plants to acquire nutrients, and can affect growth and fruit quality.

A fourth step is good selection of cultivars. It is difficult to make recommendations for specific locations about the best cultivars to grow organically. My solution is to ask other local organic growers what varieties they have had success with, and follow their lead.

A fifth step early on is to plant the berries so that they will not be too crowded or difficult to manage when they mature. Also, planting in such a way that ensures good air drainage and minimizes soil run-off will help reduce pest pressure on the planting.

Once the plants are established, the major focus should be on plant management. A sure way to have insects and pathogens infest the planting is to crowd plants together and not trellis or prune them properly. Information is available on the best ways to prune and train brambles and blueberries to ensure high yields while keeping pest pressure low.

The market is full of organic chemical products that supposedly control pests once they have infested a planting. However, these tend to have a broad spectrum of activity and use rates are relatively high. They are also relatively expensive. Growers would be much better off investing time and energy preventing pests from establishing and ensuring adequate pre-plant nutrition than to depend on later interventions to rescue them from pests.

Regardless if one is an organic or more conventional grower, the philosophy regarding crop management is the same: investments up front (before planting) pay the biggest dividends. Conventional growers have more rescue treatments at their disposal, but these have many limitations as well. One should not plan on chemical interventions to provide rescue from poor planting and lack of up-front investment in addressing soil physical, biological and nutritional properties.