

As anyone who has ever been scratched in a berry patch knows, nothing can become so tangled as a thicket of bramble bushes. Unless kept under strict control, cane fruits dwindle in yield, ripe fruit ready for plucking becomes inaccessible, and only wildlife can appreciate your planting. Proper pruning is the only way to bring easy picking to the berry patch.

Many growers combine pruning with a system of support that helps keep canes off the ground and, at the same time, makes the ripe berries easier to approach. For blackberries, tie canes to a trellis constructed of posts nailed in a "T" arrangement and connected with wire. Then anchor the canes to the wire with twine or cloth ties. Plants are nearer, less susceptible to disease, and produce more fruit. The same system of posts, with crosspieces supporting wire, can also be used for raspberries. Instead of tying, allow canes to grow inside the twin wires. Canes supported this way remain upright and are easier to harvest.

Whatever support system you use, a session or two with the pruning shears is necessary. Judicious snipping prevents the rapidly growing canes from becoming a tangle, helps improve air circulation (which reduces the chance of disease), boosts yields, and makes maintenance and berry picking easier.

The bramble fruits--red raspberry, black or purple raspberry, and blackberry--are biennial in their habit of growth and pattern of setting fruit. That means young canes or suckers sprout and flower from perennial crowns or roots and set fruit the following year. Once fruiting has occurred, canes wither and die while new canes take their place. The purpose of pruning is to make room for the upcoming shoots by removing all old and spent canes. Generally, prune brambles twice every season. Do it once in early spring to remove old and weak canes and snip back tips of canes to a height of about 24 to 30 inches to remove winter-killed tips and encourage more vigorous growth. Schedule the second pruning for after the harvest. Again, remove old or broken canes.

Treat blackberries the same way as raspberries, but add an extra pruning of lateral growth. In spring, before new growth starts, snip back lateral branches to a length of ten to 12 inches. When removing old and dead canes, be sure to destroy wood (rather than leaving it as mulch) to prevent diseases and insect larvae from wintering over and invading young, emerging canes. Burn the cuttings or bag them for garbage pickup soon after you prune.