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Success with Small Fruits

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Our north Idaho climate is ideal for growing many small fruits, especially the “brambles”, including raspberries and blackberries. Here are a few tips on care to help you achieve success.

Strawberries need well-drained soil high in organic matter, and full sun (eight hours minimum), but do not like reflected heat. They need protection from wind. In clayey soils, they work better in raised-beds that provide better drainage. Strawberries are shallow rooted, and thus intolerant of weed competition.

Due to soil borne diseases, avoid soils where strawberries, raspberries, tomatoes, peppers, eggplant, potatoes, and vine crops (squash, melons, pumpkins and cucumbers) have been growing in the past four years.

Blossom potential for the following year is based on plant health in the fall. The strawberry patch may need covering for spring frost protection.

Summer bearing red raspberries will grow naturally in a hedgerow system. The suckers, originating from the root system, will fill in the entire length of the row. No summer pruning (except for spent floricanes removal) is necessary, although suckers growing outside the 12-inch hedgerow may be removed at any time. March is the best time to prune in Pennsylvania because any cane dieback from cold will be apparent; however, raspberries can be dormant pruned any time canes are fully dormant. In the dormant season, remove canes outside the 12-inch width of the row, thin canes to 6 to 8 inches between canes, and top remaining canes to 48 to 60 inches in height, removing about one-fourth of the cane. Be sure to retain those canes with the largest diameter.

Fall-bearing red (or gold) raspberries should be mowed to a height of 1 to 2 inches in the dormant season. Although some gardeners prune them like June-bearing red raspberries to obtain the spring crop (only about 10 percent of the total crop for Heritage), it is more practical to plant some of the June bearers if a spring and a fall crop are desired.

Black and purple raspberries require summer topping throughout the summer in addition to floricanes removal. Black and purple raspberries should be topped at 36 inches, removing 3 to 4 inches of new growth. Do this two to three times during the season to top all of the canes as they grow. Topping encourages the development of lateral (fruiting) branches and increases the strength of the cane. (Note: Black raspberries will tend to have a very prostrate growth habit in the first year. If canes are pruned back in the dormant season, they will attain a more erect habit in subsequent years.)

For dormant pruning, remove all dead, damaged, and weak canes. Thin remaining canes to five to ten canes per plant. Lateral branches should be headed back to 4 to 7 inches (for blacks) or 6 to 10 inches (for purples). More vigorous plants can support longer lateral branches. All canes should be topped to 36 inches if they were not topped earlier.

Erect blackberries do not require trellising. They have, as the name suggests, very strong upright canes. They should be pruned similarly to black and purple raspberries; specifically, they should be headed back to 36 inches in the summer, with laterals cut back to 12 to 18 inches and canes thinned to 10 inches apart in the hedgerow during the dormant pruning.

Trailing blackberries should be summer tipped at about 6 inches above the highest trellis wire and tied to it during the summer months. For dormant pruning, select five to eight of the strongest canes, remove all laterals originating on the lower 3 feet of the canes, and tip back remaining laterals to 12 to 18 inches.

Grapes are challenging in north Idaho, although a successful crop can be grown with attention to detail and a little luck with the weather. When assessing weather with regard to grape growing, heat units are used to measure the suitability for grape growing. In southwestern Idaho where the climate is ideal for grapes, they receive about 2800 heat units per year. Sandpoint receives about 1500 heat units per year. It is important to pick a sunny location with good deep soils with a pH between 6.0 and 7.0 and select a variety that is adapted to shorter cool seasons.

Mike Bauer is the Horticulturist for Moose Valley Farms, a full-service garden center located in Naples at mile marker 495. For more information on growing small fruit in north Idaho, be sure to attend our class on Friday, May 22, at 10 am at Moose Valley Farms. Call 267-5108 for more information.