

Q: I have read that Blackberries have more antioxidants than any other berry, and would like to grow some. What are the best varieties for the east bay?

A: Several recent published studies on the nutrition of Blackberries do indicate that they may indeed have very high levels of antioxidants. This plant is very easy to grow as long as you provide enough water and light. Blackberries thrive on most soils providing you have adequate drainage. They do best on amended soils with frequent irrigation and at least 6 hours of direct light a day. Prepare beds by double digging to a 12" depth, adding 4-6 inches of compost and aged manure if available. You can plant now, although the varieties selection this time of year may be slender.

You will want to pick a site carefully for these long-lived plants, where you have easy access to contain the spreading roots. Your neighbors may not be as thrilled about the berries as you are. The crowns live for many years, although the canes live only for two. The first year canes are called 'primocanes', and they do not bear. The second year canes are called 'floricanes', and they die after they set fruit, and are removed. Blackberries need to be trellised for ease of harvesting. The end posts will need to be about 6' above ground, with sturdy wire stretched at 12" intervals. The first year train the primocanes up the trellis. The second years' new primocanes can be tied on the lower wires so that you can tell which one is which. After several years you will be able to tell by the bark, which changes as the canes age. Planting is usually done in the winter months when plants are available bare-root, and the soil is moist.

It is a good idea to install an irrigation line for the blackberries when you plant. They need at least 1" of water a week, so the length of time you set the system to run will depend on the type of irrigation you use. You want the soil to be moist down to at least 8" when you water. If the weather gets very hot or windy, water for longer periods of time or more often..

Varieties of blackberries include boysenberries, ollalieberries, loganberries and youngberries. Boysenberries are reddish black and are described as more similar to raspberries. Ollalieberries are slightly longer and more slender than the boysenberry and are a cross between black, logan and youngberries. Thornless blackberries are available, and easier to care for, although the flavor is described as less intense. Many cultivars of berries are available in the winter months, and most do well in our climate. The following site can give you specific information on cultivars for California gardens; <http://homeorchard.ucdavis.edu/blackberries.pdf>; <http://www.mastergardeners.org/recommend/berries.html>