

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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Contact: WSU/Skagit County Cooperative Extension: 428-4270

Picking fresh raspberries in your own backyard is one of the joys of gardening in the Northwest. Raspberries, like many cane berries, grow well in our area. Although there are a few problems associated with growing these luscious red berries, many can be solved by proper planting and pruning techniques.

Raspberries are a cool season crop and grow best where there is plenty of moisture. Their fruit may vary in color from dark red to yellow. There are two types of raspberries: summer fruiting, which has a short season with a heavy crop in midsummer, the fall fruiting, which has an extended bearing season beginning in late summer and continuing until the first fall frost.

When planting raspberries you first need to prepare the soil thoroughly. The soil should be rich in humus that will retain moisture but also it must be well drained. Raspberries will not tolerate poor drainage. They are very susceptible to root rot if they stand in soggy soil. A good method for planting if your soil is perennially soggy is to raise the soil level in the berry bed by 12 or 18 inches above the regular soil level. This method was used in the raspberry patch in the WSU Discovery Garden. That way the berry roots can stay above the wet area. Your berries will also benefit from an annual spring mulching with well-composted manure. Apply the mulch on either side of the plants but do not pile it up on the canes. Water to keep the soil moist but not soggy and keep weeds away from the plants. Weeds compete for food and water, and they also provide a place for rodents to hide and chew on the canes at ground level.

Pruning is an important element in keeping your berry plants healthy and bearing at full capacity. Fall bearing raspberries will produce one or two crops per year, depending on how they are pruned and managed. They can be made to bear two crops of berries each year, one in the fall from the top of the new canes and one in the early summer from the bottom half of those canes from last year. To achieve this you remove only the top portion of the canes after they have borne fruit in the fall and leave the bottom half of those canes to bear fruit early the next summer. If the entire cane is removed after the fall crop is produced there will be only one crop of berries the next year. By cutting back the fall bearing canes to approximately five feet, berries will be produced in the early summer from the bottom half of these last year's canes. When the canes are through fruiting on the bottom half they should be cut to the ground and removed. The oncoming new canes will produce on the top half in the fall for the second crop.

Tying the canes to support wires is important to keep them from whipping in the wind. The new canes are tied after the old ones have been removed. On summer fruiting raspberries the largest berries are usually produced on the bottom five feet of the berry canes. You can either cut off the cane tops and tie the shortened canes to support wires or, if you want more berries regardless of size you can tie the canes and bend the tops and tie them to the support wires also. When the berries are through fruiting, you can cut off the tied canes to ground level and tie up the new canes ready for next year crop.

To learn more about raspberry culture and problems visit the Washington State University Extension office and ask for bulletin EB 1640 'Growing Small Fruits in the Home Garden', EB 1388 'Small Fruit Pests,' or EB 1015 'Small Fruit Insect and Disease Control'.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Cooperative Extension, 306 S. First, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.