

It's the Berries

By Kathy Wolfe
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A bowl full of summertime

Strawberries, raspberries and blueberries: Throw in a little shortcake and you have a bowlful of summertime! As evidenced by the abundance of commercial berry farms in our region, these fruits grow well here with our cool summers, relatively mild winters and little rain during harvest time. All can be easily grown in the home garden once you know each plant's peculiarities and growing needs.

Blueberries are fairly straightforward. The most common type grown in the Pacific Northwest is the highbush blueberry: a woody, deciduous, perennial shrub which reaches 5' - 7' at maturity. These bushes can live more than 50 years, so it is good to prepare your site and soil well for their arrival. Choose a site with plenty of sunshine. Avoid areas around trees that can produce shade, compete for nutrients and house birds that may eat your berries. A well-drained, light, sandy loam that is high in organic matter and has a pH of 4.5 - 5.5 is ideal. Blueberries don't tolerate poor drainage and some gardeners plant them in raised beds or hills if their soils are wet.

Although most are self-fertile, it is best to plant more than one cultivar because cross-pollination produces larger berries. By mixing cultivars that ripen at different times, you can lengthen the harvest season. Some varieties typically grown in our region include (in order of ripening): Earliblue, Duke, Draper, Bluecrop, Bluejay, Chandler and Elliott.

Buy healthy, two-year-old plants from a reputable nursery. The best planting times are from March to April or in October. Because the root system is very shallow, it is important to add generous compost to the soil before planting to help retain adequate moisture. Fill the hole with water and allow it to drain before setting your plant. Cover with 1"-2" of mulch and water again. Prune off flower buds and do not allow plants to produce fruit the first season. Flower and fruit production hinders plant growth, which is especially important the first year.

To care for mature plants, apply a balanced fertilizer in spring, starting around bloom time; water to maintain a uniform, adequate moisture supply; pick fruit at its optimum maturity; add mulch gradually over the years to maintain a depth of six inches; and prune dead and weak branches off in January or February.

Red raspberries are distinguished by having the crown (base) of the plant being perennial and living 15 years or more, and the cane being biennial (only growing two seasons before dying off). In summer-bearing varieties, the first year a cane emerges is called a primocane and only produces leaves but no fruit. The second year that same cane is known as a florican and produces fruit then dies. Fruiting generally occurs from mid-June to mid-July.



Luscious berries are easy to grow in Skagit Valley. *Photos by Trish Varrelman / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

Fall-bearing cultivars produce some fruit on the top portion of the primocane (first year) then this tip dies off after fruiting. The following year this cane will be the floricanes (second year) and will produce fruit from the lower segment of the branch. Although this type produces in both June-July from lower floricanes and from August to frost on the top of the primocanes, the early summer crop is lower in yield and quality than the summer-bearing cultivars. This is why fall-bearing raspberries are usually managed on one-year cycles, with canes being mowed off in preparation for the next series of primocane emergence.

Red raspberries are self-fertile, do best in full sun, need good air circulation, are sensitive to wet soil and prefer a pH of 5.5 - 6.5. As with blueberries, adding organic matter will help meet these needs. Raspberries can be planted in hedgerows or as a single plant. Keep either system free from suckers and pick fruit every 3 – 4 days.



Skagit Master Gardener Bob O'Brien, coordinator of the small fruit section of the Discovery Garden, demonstrates how to prune summer raspberries. *Photo by Trish Varrelman / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

Plant raspberries early in spring. If planting bare root, set root 1" – 2" below ground level. If planting potted raspberries, plant level with the top of the container and cut canes to 8", then water frequently until established. Fertilize using a balanced 16-16-16 fertilizer two weeks after planting and twice more at 30-day intervals. Apply fertilizer all around the plant, not just at its base. Once established, fertilize annually after primocanes begin to grow (in May) and again at the end of June. Summer-bearing raspberries need support so check with your local extension office or a reliable online source for trellis system ideas and bundling techniques.

In late summer or early fall after the last fruit is picked, remove the floricanes to the ground to allow primocanes more sun exposure. After the leaves have dropped, either allow the canes to drape over the support or cut the canes to 6' and tie them in bundles to the top wire of your trellis. Cull out weak and diseased canes at this time, allowing only the strongest and most vigorous to remain.

Strawberries are of three types: June-bearing, producing one crop per year in June-July; everbearing, producing a crop in June-July and another in the fall; and day neutral, which fruit almost continuously from May to frost. June-bearers have the largest fruits and higher yield than either of the others, but your season can be extended by adding everbearing or day neutrals. All types are self-fruitful.

As with other berries, a well-drained, loamy soil high in organic material is ideal. The preferred pH for strawberries is 6-7. Strawberries remain productive for 3-4 fruiting years before they need to be removed and replanted with fresh plants. Choose a cultivar suitable to your taste and site. Discover your favorite flavor at your local fruit stand or farmer's market. Buy certified, disease-free plants from a reputable nursery. There are two systems you can use to plant: the matted row, which has 12"-18" wide rows to allow for runner spread of the June-bearing varieties; and the hill system, which has rows spaced 12"- 15" apart and is generally used for everbearing and day neutrals that have fewer runners which should be removed to produce larger fruit.

Planting depth is very important. Dig a hole large enough to spread the roots out flat. Set the root mass so the midpoint of the crown is level with the top of the soil. The topmost root should be just below the soil surface. Plant and water well. Everbearing and day-neutral strawberries should be fertilized in three stages as with raspberries. Avoid getting granular fertilizer on the crown, since they can cause burns on the leaves. For established June-bearers, fertilize in the late summer and irrigate when needed. Then just let the sunshine do its magic.

We hope you are now inspired to try one or more of these luscious berries in your home garden. Now pass the whipped cream, please!

RESOURCES:

- "Growing Strawberries in Your Home Garden." B.C. Strik. Oregon State University Extension. EC 1307. Revised March 2008.
- "Growing Raspberries in Your Home Garden." B.C. Strik. Oregon State University Extension. EC 130.6. Revised March 2008.
- "Fruits and Berries: The Basics of Growing at Home." Chuck McClung. Grow Northwest Magazine. March 10, 2013.
- "Start Easy-to-Grow Blueberries at Home." Author Judy Scott. Source: Bernadine Strik. Oregon State University Extension Service. February 9, 2011.