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Raspberries for the Home Garden

Raspberries have perennial roots and crowns but canes live for only two summers. Most raspberries are summer-bearing varieties. During the first year, the new cane (primocane or first year cane) grows vegetatively. The cane overwinters and during the second growing season the floricanes (or second year canes) produce fruit and then die. Primocanes are produced each year so fruit production continues year after year.

Grow raspberries in a part of the garden that has good air circulation and water drainage and full sunlight. Good air movement helps foliage dry faster, thereby reducing disease problems. Standing water will increase the likelihood of disease problems and death of the plants due to a lack of oxygen to the roots. Protect plants from windy sites as wind can induce excessive drying and cane injury. Any well-drained soil is satisfactory for growing raspberries. Additional water will be needed on a sandy soil.

Planting and Care

The favored planting system for red raspberries is the narrow hedgerow. Set red or yellow raspberries every 2-3 feet in rows at least 6 feet apart. Allow first year canes to spread along the row but not wider than 12 inches. Wider rows invite fungal diseases because of slow drying conditions.

Set black and purple raspberries every 4 feet between plants and 8 feet between rows. Because these cultivars do not produce root suckers, they should be maintained in a "hill" system. The "hill" does not mean mounding the soil; it refers to the cluster of canes that develops from a single plant.

Raspberry plants need to be fertilized. When young first year canes emerge in new plantings, scatter ¼ cup ammonium nitrate around each plant. Once the planting is established, fertilize yearly by May 1. Evenly distribute an all purpose fertilizer. Do not apply all fertilizer at the base of the plant, but spread it over the entire area.

Composted manure is a good source of nutrients and can be incorporated prior to planting.

Raspberries benefit from mulching. Good mulches for use in the home garden include leaves, lawn clippings, and wood chips or shavings because they are usually free of weed seeds. Add a cup blood meal to speed decomposition and protect against nitrogen deficiency in the plants.

Plentiful water is important for raspberries from spring until after harvest. Because the root system is in the top 2 feet of soil, watering regularly is more beneficial than an occasional deep soaking. Raspberries need 1-1 ½ inches of water per week from flowering until harvest.

Pruning and Training

All raspberries benefit from some type of support system because canes are susceptible to wind whipping, particularly when the fruit is present. Such a system can be as simple as posts with twine tied between them, or more elaborate with permanent posts and wire.

Raspberries grow vigorously and need to be pruned yearly. Pruning practices depend on the type of raspberry grown.

Summer-bearing red and yellow raspberries: (Boyne) After the last harvest, cut all canes that have produced fruit to ground level and remove them. This eliminates a disease source and gives primocanes more room to grow. Thin primocane to 4-5 sturdy canes per foot of row. In areas where winter injury is common, delay thinning primocanes until the following spring, however primocane will be less because of the competition among canes. Before growth starts in spring, cutting the canes to about 12 inches above the wire is desirable. Never cut more than 25% of the cane since this will begin to adversely affect yield.

Fall-bearing raspberries: (Heritage) If only a fall crop is desired, cut all canes off at the base before growth begins in the spring. Fruit will be produced on primocanes in the fall of the year. If a fall and summer crop is desired, thin the canes as described for summer-bearing raspberries. The primocanes that produced the fall crop should not be removed as they will produce fruit the following summer. Prune them back in spring to about 12 inches above the wire, or to the last visible node that had fruit.

Black and purple raspberries: (Bristol) When primocanes are between 24-30 inches in height, pinch out the tip of each shoot to induce branching. This will make the fruit easier to pick and increase production. After harvest, cut down all canes that bore fruit to ground level. Before growth begins the following spring, cut back all side branches to 12-18 inches. Select 4 to 5 canes per hill and prune out the rest. Tie these canes to the support system.

(Excerpt from the U of M extension website)