

Blackberry vs. Black Raspberry Confusion Untangled

By Susan Camp

“How do you know they’re black raspberries and not blackberries?” I asked my husband as we looked at the tangled clump of prickly vines in a corner of our upper field. Jim had spent a year in northern Maine and has told me tales of competing with black bears for raspberries and fishing spots.

We had battled blackberry canes for several years in our front garden. We couldn’t eradicate them, so we decided to cultivate a small patch in one corner next to the picket fence. This spring the canes created an attractive backdrop of green leaves and dainty, white blossoms behind the peony bed. Pulling out unwanted canes has been no trouble this summer, and we have gathered a few handfuls of small, tart berries.

The black raspberry canes in the field and the blackberry plants looked the same to me, so I decided to explore some similarities and differences. Collectively, blackberries and black, red, and purple raspberries are referred to as brambles. All are members of the Rosaceae family and many species are native to North and South America. Common blackberry (*Rubus fruticosus*) and eastern black raspberry (*Rubus occidentalis*) are found throughout eastern North America, black raspberry more commonly in cooler regions. Both plants are perennials that bear biennial canes. In the first year of growth, the lanky primocane produces large compound leaves with five to seven leaflets. During the second season, the primocane becomes the florican and produces lateral, prickly-covered branches with white or pale pink blossoms. The fruit are not actual berries, but clusters of drupelets.

There are a few differences, and once you learn what they are, you will be able to impress your friends at the next cookout. Black raspberries ripen earlier than blackberries. The fruit is smaller and less shiny, with fewer drupelets, but the secret is that the center of the black raspberry, like all raspberries, is hollow; the blackberry contains a white core. The leaves hold another secret: raspberry leaves are white on the underside, as are the canes, while blackberry leaves and canes are green.

Black raspberries are considered to be less tart than blackberries for eating fresh, while blackberries are used more frequently in cobblers and pies. Both fruits are low in calories and contain healthful amounts of Vitamins C and K and bioflavonoids, which may help to reduce the risk of various cancers.

The largest commercial production of blackberries and black raspberries occurs in the Willamette Valley in Oregon. Besides fresh eating and preserves, bramble fruits are used to produce jams and preserves, wines and liqueurs, teas, and in cosmetic preparations. Blackberry honey is dark and fruity.

In years past, it was easy to find large thickets of blackberries and black raspberries, but with increased construction, not to mention automobile pollution and use of herbicides, unless you are fortunate to have wild plants growing on your property, you may have to try your hand at producing your own bramble fruit. It won't be easy, because every little critter in the woods loves fresh berries, but you can grow enough for your family's consumption. The Virginia Cooperative Extension Publication 426-840 "Small Fruit in the Home Garden" and the Gloucester Master Gardeners book "Home Gardening in Gloucester" provide information on planning, establishing, and maintaining bramble fruits. Erect blackberry varieties include 'Darrow' and 'Cherokee'; both have prickles, as do most erect varieties. Semi-erect, thornless blackberries include 'Black Satin' and 'Dirksen'. 'Titan', 'New Logan', and 'Cumberland' are popular black raspberry cultivars. Black raspberry plants are susceptible to several viral diseases, and should be planted a minimum of 700 feet away from red varieties.

Now that you can tell blackberries and black raspberries apart, plant some next year or cultivate a wild patch. On the Middle Peninsula, you won't have to fight the bears for them, but the turkeys probably will get them before you do.

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