

Writer: Stephanie Schupska (706) 542-8981 (schupska@uga.edu)
Sources: Gerard Krewer (229) 386-3355 (gkrewer@uga.edu)

Backyard berries not as hard to grow as you think

By Stephanie Schupska
University of Georgia

With blueberry days of summer right around the corner, the thought of fresh fruit may just be tempting enough to send you to your backyard.

Producing your own delicious small fruits such as blueberries, blackberries and raspberries isn't as hard as you might think, said University of Georgia Cooperative Extension horticulturist Gerard Krewer. Berries are among the best home garden fruits for small spaces.

But those fruits do take a little patience.

"It takes time, effort and money to prepare the site where you want to grow berries and keep it free of weeds," Krewer said. "The advantages of growing your own are that it's something you produce with your own hands and will hopefully have a large quantity for a little amount of money."

Because anytime from October to March is a good time to plant, berry bushes need to go in the ground now.

"The earlier you plant, the better in Georgia," Krewer said. "We often get a lot of root growth during the winter."

While blackberries are the easiest to grow, the more finicky blueberries are the most popular right now. When it comes to those tasty blue treats, Krewer suggests the rabbiteye types such as Brightwell, Tifblue and Powderblue.

For blackberries, he suggests planting Kiowa.

"They're proven to be well-adapted to Georgia," he said. "They're very thorny. You can use it as a hedge to keep juvenile delinquents or dogs out of your yard. And they produce huge berries, berries that weigh about a third of an ounce."

You can also grow thornless blackberries such as Arapaho and Navaho, but the thorny Kiowa is more productive.

"Most home gardeners are better off planting varieties with thorns," Krewer said. "They're generally a little more disease-resistant and more vigorous. But there are always exceptions to this."

Statewide, the best raspberries to plant are Dorman Red. In north Georgia, Heritage and Redwing also do well but need regular attention.

"The Dorman Red is very nice for cooking, but not very nice for fresh eating" because of their lack of natu-

ral sugars, Krewer said. "They're very beautiful, very pretty, like a jewel, a ruby. As a cooked product, they're very good, especially in jams."

When the urge to grow kicks in, Krewer has tips for making berry production easier.

1. Select a spot that gets at least half a day of sunlight, doesn't have many tree roots in it and is well-drained with no standing water.

2. Get your soil tested for pH levels. Blueberries grow well in a pH of 4 to 5.3, while blackberries and raspberries thrive in a soil pH of 6 to 6.5. You may need to add lime to raise the pH or sulfur to lower it.

3. Be patient. Depending on the size of the bush you plant, in the second year you'll get a handful of blueberries or a half crop of blackberries and raspberries. In the third summer, you should get a full crop of blackberries and raspberries and a significant amount of blueberries. This is due to the berry bushes' life cycles.

(Stephanie Schupska is a news editor with the University of Georgia College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences.)