



Kevin Milaeger

# Milaeger's

## Growing Raspberries in SE Wisconsin

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**Most everyone likes raspberries.** They are one of those sweet, luscious fruits that taste like nothing else, and they taste even better if you grow them yourself.

Raspberries are native to and widespread throughout the temperate regions of the northern hemisphere, worldwide. Despite their ubiquity in nature, raspberries were brought into cultivation fairly late. Evidence shows that raspberries have been consumed by humans since at least 2500 B.C., but they weren't brought into cultivation until 400 A.D. By 1600 A.D. records show that the superiority of various varieties was recognized, and those superior forms were being actively cultivated. Ethnobotanists surmise that raspberries were so abundant in nature that there was no need to cultivate them. It was only after the rise of civilization that people began bringing the plants into their gardens. Picking them in the wild had become too inconvenient.

How to grow raspberries---the short version.

When I tell inexperienced gardeners that raspberries are biennial, I almost always get a quizzical look in return. They are vaguely familiar with the word biennial, but they have difficulty applying the concept to raspberries. I can almost hear them thinking---"this is going to be complicated." In fact, it is not. For starters, if you picture these plants growing in the wild, they got along fine before mankind brought them into the garden and began cultivating them. So, really there is nothing that *must* be done to assure that you get harvestable fruit, but there are some things that *should* be done to maximize your efforts. If you never prune them, you will have a tangled, impenetrable, messy looking berry patch, but they won't die. If you prune them improperly they won't die either. You may well lose all or part of one crop, but they won't die. No matter what you do, raspberries will bounce back and you will have another opportunity. Once you get into the raspberry rhythm, and you understand their growth pattern and see the results of your pruning, you can maximize production. And who doesn't want more raspberries?



Royalty



Souris

Every spring, "summer raspberry" plants (the most common type) send up new, green-stemmed shoots, properly called "canes." These canes grow to about three feet tall during the season, all the while maintaining the green stem color. These canes will not produce fruit in the first season. After the growing season is over, these canes go dormant for the winter---leave them alone during this period. The following spring these same canes will have turned brown, and new green growth will appear on the canes, as side shoots. They are then ready to flower and bear fruit (if everything goes well, and there is no reason it shouldn't.) After the

fruit bearing season is over, you can prune away these brown canes---they will never bear fruit again, and will die when winter sets in. While the plant is bearing fruit, it will have sent up a number of new green canes that will bear the next year, so you will have fruit every year. The second raspberry type is the "fall bearing." If you plant this type in the spring, you can expect fruit in the fall of the same year. It is important not to cut down the canes in winter when they are dormant, because they will bear fruit again the following summer. After that crop, you can remove the brown canes. A third type is the so-called "everbearing." These bear in July on second year (brown) canes and again in September of the same year. They don't bear continuously, as the name might imply, but they do bear twice in one season. The second harvest is smaller and so is the fruit, but still, it's nice to pick berries in September. With any of these types, please keep in mind that if you make a mistake and prune at the wrong time, the plant will not die. You may lose a crop, but that is a temporary problem. Don't sweat it. If in doubt, don't prune at all. The garden might be unkempt, but your crop will be assured. You'll understand the raspberry rhythm before long.

Consider your planting site carefully. Raspberry beds usually thrive for many years, so its best to do it right the first time. Raspberries do best in full sun. A little shade is acceptable, but there will be a drop in production. They aren't terribly fussy about soil, but an ideal soil would have a slightly acid pH, somewhere around 6.0. In the Racine area most of us have a higher pH because of all the limestone, so you definitely don't want to add lime. Rather add some peat moss or compost. Raspberries can easily tolerate a little clay in the soil, but they do not like a wet soil. Some folks recommend planting on ground that has a slight grade, so water will run off. However, they don't like to dry out, especially as their fruit develops---mulch can be beneficial if this is a problem. Despite all these

"requirements," raspberries thrive most anywhere. When choosing a site to grow them, the most important thing to keep in mind might be the plants invasive nature---how quickly they reproduce via underground shoots. Please see the photo of the plants in my own garden. I planted these in May 2011 and you can



see that each plant has already sent out about 40 new shoots. Next year, each shoot can put out another 40 shoots. You get the idea. Therefore, when the canes come up, they need to be thinned out. It is tempting to think "more canes---more fruit" but if the canes are too dense, production is diminished and general plant health often declines. Remove any new growth that appears to be weak or inferior. Then remove more shoots so that the remaining ones are about 6" apart. Your patch should end up with rows that are no more than about 24" wide at the base. They will be wider at the top---just right for easy picking.



Anne Yellow

As many of you know, I am a great proponent of sharing the garden with friends. Since raspberries are so prolific in producing offshoots, I like to propagate some of them, and have them on hand to give as gifts. When friends visit and sample your berries, a plant makes a nice parting gift. It's very simple to do. You probably have some old pots lying around your garage. Find some that are about 6-8" wide. Dig out a few of the actively growing side shoots (you should have plenty if your plants are a couple of years old) and put a couple in each of the pots. Make sure there are some roots on each piece. Use some

decent potting soil or good garden loam. Water them in and put them in a bright spot with no direct light. They have been through a traumatic disturbance (the severing from the mother plant), so they don't need the additional stress that direct sunlight sometimes affords. Keep the soil damp. You'll have nice little plants to give away in a few weeks. You can do the same with blackberries.

Plant support is an important concern, but probably not for the first year. It is especially so if you garden is fairly small. The arching raspberry canes (they have small thorns!) can scratch your arms as you are picking or even just walking past. Training the plants can solve this problem. It will also keep the fruit at around chest height so it makes for easier picking. You can find many staking options on the web.



Heritage

We already have raspberry plants available for sale. This year we are planning on offering at least four varieties.

'Heritage' An everbearing red berry. Medium sized, and flavorful. Bears late June into July. Bears again in September, but with smaller fruit. Our best seller.

'Royalty' July bearing purple raspberry. Large, firm, and sweet. Insect and disease resistant.

'Anne Yellow' Fall bearing, with a second crop the following spring. Beautiful yellow-apricot color. Large, firm, sweet, and aromatic.

'Souris' July bearing. An improved red variety, very sweet and highly productive.

Growing any kind of food is very rewarding. Raspberries are a little bit of work, like most things that are worthwhile. But that's what gardening is, after all---not sitting back in an easy chair watching things grow. Once you pick your first pint of berries, you'll experience that certain feeling of satisfaction in accomplishment. Soon, you'll be giving berries away, adding "Yes, I grew these---there's nothing to it."