

THE BLACKBERRY.

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Of all our native fruits, for eating out of hand, the blackberry is my favorite. Not the little red berry we sometimes find in the market place, that must be labeled "blackberry," in order that the dealer may not deceive his customers by calling it something else, but the large, luscious, shiny, black blackberry, the one that grows in partial shade, under the bushes, the one that the pickers missed the last time they went over the rows; the nectar from such as this is surely fit for the Gods, even though they were distilling their nectarean beverage from the dried apple when interviewed by our worthy president. If a visitor to my blackberry patch is suddenly attacked with peculiar convulsive movements of the hand and arm, accompanied by a visible depression of both cheeks, I do not summon a physician or diagnose St. Vitus dance. If a picker frequently lifts the hand somewhat higher than is necessary to deposit the berry in the box, I am not frightened. There is something in the atmosphere of the blackberry plantation that gives me the same symptoms.

Perhaps this taste for the blackberry was enhanced, when a mere boy, by its admixture with the pleasure of gathering and eating the wild blackberry, of which the woods furnished an abundance. It was the picnic season of the year when they were ripe; then the father and mother, the boys and the girls, would take each a pail proportioned to his or her ability as a picker, and proceed to the blackberry patch, there to meet with neighbors and friends from far and near, and pick and visit until our pails were full, or until it was time to return home. They did not carry in extra fine shape, but in those days we were in blissful ignorance of the advantages of the Hallock quart box. But such berries, the memory of their taste lingers with me yet. During a residence of about a dozen years in the city, where we had occasion to purchase a great many boxes of blackberries, the question would often occur to me: "Why are not the tame blackberries which are supposed to be an improvement upon the wild ones, their equal in eating qualities? Since growing berries ourselves, we have found that a well grown and well ripened

tame blackberry approaches very nearly to its aboriginal ancestors in flavor and sweetness.

We are advised to set the blackberry on deep, rich, moist, mellow soil. As depth and fineness of soil are but conditions for increasing its capacity for storing water, we might define ideal blackberry soil as that which is in condition to hold the maximum amount of moisture and yet be well drained, either naturally or artificially, so the problem is quite largely a study of means by which to put our soil in this condition, and when this is solved, the fertility question, also the aerating of the soil, will be quite largely provided for.

Anyone should be able to grow blackberries on soil that is perfect, but it requires skill and labor to produce a crop where the conditions are not ideal, and it is from the latter standpoint that we write this paper. I do not know that the blackberry requires a much greater amount of water to mature its crop than the strawberry and raspberry, but it ripens later. at a time when, if we are not blessed with frequent showers, the water contents of the soil is reduced to the minimum by the hot sun and summer winds, so it behooves us to use every effort to not only fit the soil for the reception of water but also to prevent, as far as possible, its undue evaporation. We are told that water is found in the soil as a film of moisture surrounding each particle, and the finer pulverized, and the smaller the particles, the greater will be the amount of moisture contained. We can increase the capacity of our ground for moisture by growing clover, the roots of which penetrate to a considerable depth then by turning under the crop at the proper time, or by plowing under other green crops, or an abundance of coarse farmyard manure, we have, upon the partial decay of same, a quantity of that material called humus, the chemical action of which not only fines the soil, increasing its capacity for water, but also unlocks much fertility that would otherwise be unavailable. I believe we should strive at all times to keep up the supply of humus, especially in our heavier clay soils.

We may retard evaporation somewhat by our choice of slope, thus on a northern or northeastern, or even an eastern slope, we are protected, to a certain extent, from the direct rays of the afternoon sun, and also shield, in a measure, from the south and southwesterly

winds. We may also retard evaporation by mulching. I find it an excellent plan, and where material plentiful, I would mulch my blackberries along the rows, cultivating between. This not only holds moisture, but adds to our supply of humus. Straw, corn stalks and manure with plenty of coarse litter for bedding, would answer the purpose. The most important element however, in the conservation of moisture is cultivation, which we will refer to a little later on.

The ground being thoroughly prepared, I prefer to set by line, as the rows can be made more nearly straight in this way. Would not have the rows nearer than eight feet apart, as I have found by experience that a less distance than this makes it difficult to get through with the horse and cultivator, and the man will need clothing made from some very tough material, likewise the horse will also need an extra garment unless his every day coat is well tanned horse hide.

I have had the best success in setting plants about one foot apart in the rows, forming a hedge row. While this plan requires a great many plants and extra labor in setting, I am not sure that the first crop will not be enough better to cover this extra expense and labor, especially will this be true if one grows his own plants. The berries seem to be larger and better where there is ample room for each cane, than where crowded together, four or five canes to the hill. When set in hills I do not try to keep the plantation growing in this shape but encourage the growth of new canes between hills, and thin out the canes in the original hills.

CULTIVATION.

Formerly we cultivated to kill weeds. The old rule was twice through the corn each way with the double shovel and twice with the hoe. We raised excellent corn and thought it was because we had kept the weeds out. The modern idea is to stir the soil for the purpose of saving moisture, and, incidentally, we prevent the growth of weeds. The weeds have been a schoolmaster to bring us to something better. Like the old time schoolmasters they have been severe and strict in their discipline; they have kept us digging until we have realized, at least in part, the import of the words: "Cursed is the ground for thy sake." They have wielded the whip over us as a

taskmaster, forcing us to make brick without straw, until we have learned something of the object of tillage. As the roots of the blackberry grow quite near to the surface, only shallow cultivation is permissible. We practice, so far as possible, plowing from two to four inches deep, (depending somewhat upon the distance from the row,) with the one horse turning plow, as soon as the soil is dry enough to work in the spring, and before taking the plants from their winter beds. From this time on until the crop is gathered, cultivation should be frequent enough to keep a dust mulch on the surface of the soil.

The pruning of the blackberry is a subject upon which it is difficult to give specific instructions. Each grower must learn this quite largely from his own study and observations, but a few principles may be laid down which will give us a basis to work from. It is evident that a soil which is ideal in its capacity for holding moisture will mature a larger crop of berries than one that is not thus favored. It is also true that the land that is thoroughly cultivated throughout the season will ripen more crates of berries than that which is allowed to become hard and to grow up to weeds and suckers which compete with the blackberry plants for moisture. Varieties also differ in their tendency to set more or less fruit. Therefore knowing our soil and the varieties we grow, and having outlined our plan of cultivation for the season, we have something to guide us in the operation of pruning, and I would rather err on the side of cutting back a few buds too many than to risk having a picking or two of seedy berries.

The pinching back of the canes during growth I am inclined to think from experimenting in a small way, is a good practice, especially with a tall growing variety like the Snyder. I would pinch them about eighteen inches to two feet in height. The branched, stocky cane is not so liable to injury from heavy winds as the one allowed to grow to considerable height. If we pinch them back too high the branches are liable to come out from near the top, making the cane top heavy, thus inviting, rather than preventing, liability to damage from winds.

We cut out the old canes as soon after the last picking as possible, and cultivate between the rows. We are planning, from this

time on, to sow a cover crop of oats or barley, as one of the means for keeping up the supply of humus.

We have had quite a little difficulty in securing pickers who can tell when the blackberry is ripe. There seems to be a general impression among them that every berry that is black is ripe. There is also more or less color blindness among pickers, many of them thinking that a berry which is half black is ready to pick. It requires practice, and one should learn to tell a ripe blackberry not only by taste, but by sight and touch. Twice per week is as often as we pick our blackberries. Of course, if we ship to a distant market, we must use judgment and pick somewhat less mature than for a home market.

We find that a good way to hold customers, is to allow the berries, especially the first picking, to remain on the bushes until we think they are fully ripe, then when a family eats a box or so of them they want more. Growers are apt to be in too much of a hurry in putting their first picking on the market.

I would not attempt to grow the blackberry without some winter protection. Even the most hardy varieties, I believe, will produce a better crop by being covered, and sometimes we may be ahead the difference between a good crop and no crop at all. If the work is pressing, we sometimes leave them with only as much dirt on as one man can shovel while another lays them down, but prefer having two men who can cover them very nicely as fast as one man puts them down.

The selling and shipping of fruit is to be discussed in a paper to follow, so I will close this paper with only a brief reference to the subject. If we are not so situated as to take advantage of shipping associations, we will need to look up special markets and grow a grade of fruit suited to those markets, but above all things we should make the most of a home market. We must exercise skill in growing the blackberry, care in picking and packing, and when our customers learn that a box of our berries is to be depended upon, from top to bottom, and every time, we will not only hold our own, but our market will expand as the years come and go.