

BRAMBLES, LOGANBERRIES AND TAYBERRIES

Canny breeders have spawned thornless berries that make fruit growing a joy.

Modern brambles and hybrid berries are much more user-friendly than their wild ancestors. Loganberries, Tummelberries and Tayberries will fit snugly against any sunny wall or fence.

Wild bramble stems are covered with unforgiving thorns which cling to your arms and trousers as you try harvesting the small, sweet black berries. They sprawl endlessly, making them much harder to harvest than the wild rasps that make the tastiest jam possible. These brambles and rasps have spawned a tribe of thornless, tasty soft fruit and we have an American judge to thank for this. In 1883, James Harvey Logan [1841-1928], an amateur horticulturalist from Santa Cruz, California, tried crossing the brambles 'Texas Early' and 'Aughinburgh' to make a better commercial variety. As it happened, he did this close to a raspberry, 'Red Antwerp', and as all 3 plants flowered at the same time, they cross-pollinated. He planted 50 of the resulting seeds, one of which turned out to be the loganberry we now know. This was introduced to Europe in 1897, and the 'American Thornless', a prickle-free mutation, was developed in 1933.

Breeders felt that, while loganberries were very vigorous, their flavour and hardiness could be improved, so started to develop a wide range of new varieties. These include: the Scottish Tayberry, a cross between loganberry and black raspberry; the Tummelberry, a cross between 2 Tayberries; and the Boysenberry, a hybrid from loganberry, raspberry and bramble. There are also lots of other crosses that aren't well known or aren't available in this country, like the Santiam Blackberry. Although I grow a Tayberry, sadly not the new thornless 'Buckingham', I'm also delighted to give space to a Loganberry. To enjoy fully ripe fruit, though, I need to grow it in my greenhouse and get a wonderful early crop in late May and June.

All these plants are treated in much the same way, combining the vigour of the bramble and the 2 year fruiting cycle of raspberries. They need a lot of space and although brambles will handle partial shade, they and all the others do best in a sunny spot. They need rich, moist and free-draining soil, but won't tolerate waterlogging. Plants usually come in containers, so dig a large enough hole to spread out the roots as widely as possible and, as usual, water the hole before planting, with the crown 8cm below soil level. Then cover the soil with a thick mulch, going close to, but not touching the stems.

You'll need to provide a sturdy frame for any of these plants. We're usually told that a 2.5 metres spacing is enough, but brambles, in my experience, need twice that distance. When growing against a wall, run wires at least 1.5m to each side of the crown, spacing the horizontal wires every ½m apart to a total height of 2m. After drilling holes in the wall, use long screws so the wires run 5cm proud of the wall to allow ventilation all round the branches. If you're making a post and wire fence, sink the posts 45cm into the soil, with 2 metres above ground. You'll need diagonal straining posts at each end to stop the uprights being forced inwards as you tighten the wires. Use special straining bolts to tighten the wire as it slackens off over time.

After planting, cut the stems to a good bud to allow the plants to throw up fresh growth. Select the 4 best branches and tie them to the wires as they grow. Remove all others. These branches will bear fruit in the second year and the plant will produce new stems for the following year. After the harvest, cut the 2 year old branches back to ground level and tie in next year's stems. It's none too easy dealing with the new branches before the old ones are cut out. The traditional method was to train the first year's growth to one side of the crown, and the second year's to the other. Cutting out then became easy, but no one has that much space, so bundle

the new shoots as close together as possible till pruning time. That's much easier said than done, so do your best and avoid standing on the new branches while picking fruit.

If you've got an established plant, get pruning now, if you haven't already done so. When cutting out the old wood, do this in sections to avoid damaging the new growth. Boysenberries throw out lateral shoots from the main branches and these should be trimmed to 30cm to allow for good fruiting and, in late spring, the main branches are nipped back to 90cm. Loganberries and Tayberries also produce better fruit this way as the branches become weaker if they grow any longer. Brambles will fill whatever space you have.

These fruits are so adaptable: I've made a long hedge using different varieties, and I believe you could even train a plant over an arch. Pick and enjoy, however you grow them.