

RASPBERRIES - PLANTING AND GROWING + SOME PESTS TO LOOK OUT FOR

Little beats a crop of sweet raspberries, but make sure you give them room to breathe.

Raspberries are easy to grow and follow on beautifully after strawberries, but unlike strawberries, they won't thrive in pots but need space and open ground.

If you have a small patio garden, you'll need to follow in the footsteps of our great poet, Hugh MacDiarmid, and, armed with a basket, scour the countryside for wild rasps. In his autobiography, 'Lucky Poet', [1943], he writes: "In the extensive policies of the Duke of Buccleuch there were great stretches of raspberry bushes, the fruit of which the public were allowed to pick". Although much smaller than cultivated rasps, their flavour is more concentrated and well worth a Saturday afternoon's foray. You'll often find the fruit along a dyke or at the edge of a forestry track. The acid soil and dappled shade of an immature forest are ideal.

It's only in the last couple of centuries when cheap sugar imports made it possible to preserve the fruit, that we have started growing serious quantities of rasps in the garden. Before then, people could use a different preserving medium. John Cockburn of Ormiston, when writing to his gardener in the mid 18th Century, says: "I am convinced George [a local publican] will take more raspberry from you than you can raise, for Brandy every year. If Gentlemen like them in Punch at George's .. they would probably buy the fruit to use it at home." [Scottish Historical Society 1904]. Nonetheless, sugar became the main preservative, and with the development of the railway network, raspberry production became and continues to be big business.

Wild raspberries are ready in August, towards the end of the school summer holidays, but the cultivated ones should be ready from now on, right into the late autumn. I prefer large, dark red fruit, and reckon yellow fruiting varieties are a bit on the mild side.

As you'd expect, raspberries, like every crop, have their share of problems and the most common is raspberry beetle. If the berries have dried up, brown patches, you ain't the first to dine on them: this tiny pest has beaten you to it. The adult beetle overwinters in the ground close to the raspberry dreel, or row. It comes out in May, flies off to feed on hawthorn or apple blossom, and returns to the rasps at bud burst. It lays its eggs, and when the larvae hatch out, they start tucking into the fruit. After a month or so, they fall to the ground, usually in the infested fruit that you avoided picking. And so the cycle is repeated next year.

As with so many pests, the secret is to break their life cycle. In the spring, lay a mulch of rough compost, shavings or grass clippings, so making it hard for the adult fly to emerge from the soil. You then remove and compost this mulch and any larvae at the end of the summer.

If you plan to establish a new row of rasps, you'll need to first prepare the soil well. Clear all perennial weeds and dig in well rotted muck or home-made compost in a row 60cm wide. Do this 2 or 3 months before planting to allow the soil to settle down. The length of the row depends on your number of crowns, remembering that they should be spaced 40-45cm apart. The rasps will grow to around 2 metres, so need support: a post and wire frame, with 3 or 4 horizontal wires is ideal, though I find the rabbit wire fence round a fruitcage also works a treat.

It's best to plant in October as the soil will still be warm enough to encourage new growth. Make the hole for each crown sufficiently deep to accommodate the large roots, leaving the top of the crown proud of the soil line. Firmly tamp the soil round each crown and level out the soil with the back of a rake to leave a smart finish. Early next spring, cut the canes back to 15cm above the ground, and as the new canes grow, tie into the horizontal wires: they will provide a good crop in their second year. Only keep the strongly growing canes and space them about 15cm apart.

In the spring of the second year, soak the ground and then cover with a mulch. The third year's canes will also start growing up and they should be loosely tied in till you've picked the very last berry. The old canes are then cut out and the new ones secured against the winter winds.

Summer fruiting rasps are harvested from 2 year old canes, but autumn ones will fruit on the same year's canes. The canes from a previous year are cut down to the ground in February and will grow to around 1 metre, producing rasps for you in September. One word of caution: these later rasps will produce a forest of

canes, given half a chance, so, to let the berries ripen properly, keep the row no wider than 45cm, cutting down any of the outer canes.