



SWEET BOMBDIGGITY FARMS

The Complete *Berry* Guide

*Planting, care, pruning & harvest —
everything you need for a flourishing berry patch*

IT'S NEVER TOO LATE TO DESIGN A FLOURISHING LIFE

Welcome to the Patch

If you've been following along this season, you know we've spent a lot of time out among the canes and bushes, sorting out what to cut and why it matters. This guide gathers everything we've covered, plus more, in one place so you're not hunting through old posts every time you head outside.

Now that's BombDiggity.

— Jules & Lane

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● A NOTE ON YOUR GROWING ZONE

We're writing from East Tennessee, but this guide is for growers everywhere. Every berry notes a general USDA hardiness range, check it against your own zone (search "USDA hardiness zone map" if you're not sure). Pruning timing may shift a few weeks with your local frost dates, but the rules stay the same.

● WHAT ABOUT GRAPES?

Botanically, grapes are true berries too, but they're trained on cordons and spurs, a completely different system from canes or shrub wood, so they didn't make this edition. They deserve a guide of their own, and ours is coming soon.



Blackberries

Rubus fruticosus

Blackberries grow on a two-year cane cycle, which means the plant you're looking at today is doing one of two jobs: growing, or fruiting. Learning to read the leaves is the whole game.

5

LEAFLETS = PRIMOCANE (this year's growth, next year's fruit)

3

LEAFLETS = FLORICANE (fruiting now, done after harvest)

● BEFORE YOU APPLY THE RULE: CHECK YOUR VARIETY

Most blackberries are floricanes-only, so the rule above is all you need. **Primocane-fruiting varieties like Prime-Ark are the exception** — they fruit in their first year, so there's no floricanes to preserve. For those, cut the entire planting to the ground each winter and let new primocanes fruit the following season.

● PLANTING

- Hardy in zones 5–9, varies by variety
- Full sun, at least 6–8 hours a day
- Well-drained soil, slightly acidic to neutral (pH 5.5–7)
- Space plants 3–4 feet apart in rows 8–10 feet apart
- Plant in early spring or fall while dormant

● PRUNING

- **3 leaflets (floricanes):** cut all the way to the ground once they finish fruiting. They will not fruit again.
- **5 leaflets (primocanes):** top off at 3–4 feet to encourage lateral shoots — that's where next year's berries form.
- Thin out weak or crowded canes to improve airflow

● CARE & NEEDS

- 1–2 inches of water per week, more during fruiting
- Trellis or wire support keeps canes off the ground
- Mulch to retain moisture and suppress weeds
- Feed in early spring with a balanced fertilizer

● HARVEST & WASH

Pick when berries are fully black and release easily with a gentle tug — a berry that resists isn't ready. Rinse just before eating in a colander under cool water; skip soaking, which turns them mushy. Pat dry and store unwashed berries in the fridge for best shelf life.



Raspberries

Rubus idaeus

Same family, same primocane and floricanes system as blackberries — but keep an eye out for everbearing varieties, which add a second fruiting window into the mix.

5

LEAFLETS = PRIMOCANE, first year growth

3

LEAFLETS = FLORICANE, fruiting this year

BEFORE YOU APPLY THE RULE: CHECK YOUR VARIETY

The 3/5 leaflet rule assumes a standard, floricanes-only variety. **Everbearing raspberries are the exception** — their 5-leaflet primocanes fruit in fall of year one, then can fruit again next summer as a floricanes. Check the tag if unsure.

PLANTING

- Hardy in zones 3–8, varies by variety
- Full sun; tolerates a little afternoon shade in hot climates
- Rich, well-drained soil, pH 5.6–6.2
- Space plants 2–3 feet apart in rows 6–8 feet apart
- Plant bare-root canes in early spring

PRUNING

- **3 leaflets (floricanes):** cut to the ground after fruiting, same as blackberries
- **5 leaflets (primocanes):** top at 3–4 feet for lateral shoots
- **Everbearing types:** cut to the ground each winter for one crop, or leave standing for a second smaller crop next summer

CARE & NEEDS

- Consistent moisture, roughly 1–2 inches per week
- Support with a trellis, especially in windy spots
- Mulch heavily; shallow roots dry out fast
- Thin new shoots to keep rows from overcrowding

HARVEST & WASH

Ripe raspberries slide off the core with barely a touch — if you're tugging, it's not ready. They're delicate and don't hold up to soaking, so rinse gently right before you eat or use them, then let them air dry on a towel rather than rubbing them.

WHAT ABOUT BLACK RASPBERRIES?

They don't follow the 3/5 rule — go by cane texture instead: primocanes are green with a waxy bloom, floricanes darken and turn woody in year two.



Wineberries

Rubus phoenicolasius

A raspberry relative with the same three-and-five-leaflet system — but one important difference before you plant a patch on purpose.

• A NOTE BEFORE YOU PLANT

Wineberries are considered invasive in many areas of the U.S. Their cane tips root readily wherever they touch soil, so they spread fast and aggressively. Check your local extension office before introducing them, and if you already have some, lean toward controlling spread rather than encouraging it.

5

LEAFLETS = PRIMOCANE

3

LEAFLETS = FLORICANE, fruiting

• PLANTING & CARE

- Hardy in zones 5–8
- Full sun to partial shade; very adaptable
- Tolerates poor soil better than most brambles
- Contain the patch with a buried root barrier or mowed border
- Pin cane tips up off the ground if you want to limit rooting

• PRUNING

- Same florican-fruiting pattern as raspberries
- **3 leaflets:** cut to the ground after fruiting
- **5 leaflets:** top off to control size and spread, not just to boost fruit

• HARVEST & WASH

The fuzzy red husk splits open as the berry ripens underneath — pick once the berry itself has fully colored and pulls away easily. Wash gently just before eating, same as raspberries.



Strawberries

Fragaria × ananassa

No canes here — strawberries spread by runners, and the biggest thing that separates good beds from great ones is knowing your type and renovating on schedule.

JUNE-BEARING

one big crop, needs annual renovation

EVERBEARING / DAY-NEUTRAL

smaller crops all season, no renovation cut

PLANTING

- Hardy in zones 3–10, varies by variety
- Full sun, at least 6–8 hours a day
- Rich, well-drained soil, pH 5.8–6.5
- Plant in early spring; space 12–18 inches apart
- Pinch off first-year flower buds so the plant establishes instead of fruiting too early

PRUNING (RENOVATION)

- **June-bearing:** immediately after harvest, mow or cut foliage down to about 1 inch above the crown, then thin to 4–6 inches between plants
- **Everbearing/day-neutral:** skip the hard renovation cut — just remove runners and dead foliage as you go

CARE & NEEDS

- About 1 inch of water per week, steady and even
- Mulch with straw to keep berries clean and off wet soil
- Control runners — let a few root to fill the bed, snip the rest
- Replace a bed every 3–4 years as yields decline with age

HARVEST & WASH

Pick when berries are fully red all the way to the cap, since strawberries don't ripen further once picked. Leave the green cap on until you're ready to eat or use them. Rinse gently under cool water right before eating, then hull — washing ahead of time speeds up mold.



Blueberries

Vaccinium spp.

A different animal entirely. Blueberries don't run on the primocane and florican cycle at all — they're a slower-growing shrub that fruits on wood that's a couple of years old.

PLANTING

- Hardy in zones 3–9 depending on type (highbush 3–7, rabbiteye 6–9)
- Full sun, 6–8 hours minimum
- Acidic soil is non-negotiable: pH 4.5–5.5
- Plant more than one variety nearby for cross-pollination and better fruit set
- Good drainage matters — avoid low spots that stay soggy

CARE & NEEDS

- Feed in early spring with an acid-loving fertilizer (azalea/rhododendron blends work)
- Mulch with pine bark or pine needles — holds moisture and keeps soil acidic
- Test soil pH periodically; amend with elemental sulfur if it drifts too high
- Be patient — bushes often take 5+ years to hit a real stride

PRUNING

- No leaflet-counting here — it's about wood age, not canes
- Prune in late winter while dormant
- Remove the oldest, grayest canes at the base once they're past their prime (typically 5–6 years old)
- Thin crossing branches so light and air reach the center of the bush

HARVEST & WASH

A ripe blueberry is fully blue with a dusty pale bloom and drops into your hand with barely a touch. Wash right before eating, not before storing — excess moisture speeds up mold in the fridge. A quick rinse and pat dry is all they need.



Mulberries

Morus spp.

A tree, not a bramble or a shrub — mulberries are about the easiest fruit on this list to grow, and pruning is mostly about keeping the harvest within arm's reach.

● PLANTING

- Hardy in zones 4–9, varies by species
- Full sun, at least 6 hours a day
- Adaptable to most soils; prefers well-drained, slightly acidic to neutral
- Space 15–30 feet apart for standard varieties; dwarf types can go 6–10 feet
- Keep away from walkways and parking — dropped fruit stains

● CARE & NEEDS

- Deep, regular watering the first season to establish; low-maintenance after that
- Light annual feeding is usually plenty
- Hardy and largely pest and disease resistant once established
- Root-prune or trench at the drip line if it starts crowding its space

● PRUNING

- Prune while dormant, late winter to early spring, before buds turn green
- Top back to control height and keep fruit within reach — it responds with stronger lateral branches
- Remove dead, damaged, or crossing branches for airflow
- Avoid cuts over 2 inches across; mulberry bleeds sap heavily from large wounds
- Optional summer prune in July, cutting new growth back by about half to keep the tree bushy and pickable

● HARVEST & WASH

Mulberries don't ripen further once picked, so wait until they're fully colored and slightly soft. The easiest harvest method is laying a sheet under the tree and gently shaking the branches — ripe berries drop right off. Rinse just before eating; they're delicate and juice easily, so handle gently and don't let them sit wet.



Elderberries

Sambucus canadensis

Elderberry is a shrub, not a cane-fruiter, and its whole rhythm is slower and more forgiving than a bramble patch.

● PLANTING

- Hardy in zones 3–9
- Full sun to partial shade
- Adaptable to a wide range of soils; prefers moist, well-drained ground
- Space plants 6–8 feet apart — they get big
- Plant two different varieties for reliable pollination

● PRUNING

- Prune in late winter while fully dormant
- Fruits on second-year and older wood, not on a strict annual cycle
- Remove canes three years or older — they lose productivity with age
- Thin weak or crossing growth to keep the center open

● CARE & NEEDS

- Consistent moisture, especially the first two seasons
- Mulch well; shallow roots appreciate the protection
- Light feeding in spring is usually enough — elderberry isn't a heavy feeder
- Net the clusters if birds start beating you to the harvest

● HARVEST & WASH

Harvest whole clusters once berries are deep purple-black and the cluster droops under its own weight. Elderberries must be cooked before eating — never eat them raw. Rinse clusters well, then strip berries from stems (a fork works well) before cooking down.



Currants & Gooseberries

Ribes spp.

Close cousins, grown and pruned the same way — compact, cold-loving shrubs that fruit on older wood, not on canes. A great fit for a spot with a little afternoon shade.

PLANTING

- Hardy in zones 3–8 — both dislike hot, humid summers, so this is a cool-climate crop
- Full sun in cooler areas; afternoon shade where summers run hot
- Rich, well-drained soil, pH 6–6.5
- Space plants 3–5 feet apart

PRUNING

- Prune while dormant, late winter
- Fruits best on wood that's 1–3 years old
- Remove any wood older than 3 years at the base each year
- Aim to keep 8–10 productive canes total per bush, a mix of ages
- Thin crowded centers for airflow and easier picking

CARE & NEEDS

- Consistent moisture; mulch well to keep roots cool
- Light annual feeding in early spring
- Good airflow matters — both are prone to powdery mildew in stagnant, humid spots
- Check local restrictions before planting — some states limit currants as a pine blister rust host

HARVEST & WASH

Currants ripen in clusters (strigs) and are ready when fully colored and slightly soft; strip the whole cluster off and destem after.

Gooseberries are ready when they give slightly to a gentle squeeze, tartness varies by variety, some are best picked a little under-ripe for cooking. Rinse both gently just before use.



Aronia

Aronia melanocarpa (Chokeberry)

A native North American shrub that's about as low-maintenance as fruit gets, along with some of the highest antioxidant levels of any berry. The name comes from the fruit's dry, puckering taste fresh off the bush, most people cook or juice it rather than eat it raw.

PLANTING

- Hardy in zones 3–9 — extremely cold and heat tolerant
- Full sun to partial shade
- Adaptable to nearly any soil, including wet spots
- Space plants 4–6 feet apart

PRUNING

- Prune while dormant, late winter
- Very low-maintenance — mainly remove dead, damaged, or crossing branches
- Once mature (around year 4–5), remove a few of the oldest stems at the base each year to keep new growth coming
- Can be cut back hard if it outgrows its space; it recovers well

CARE & NEEDS

- Self-pollinating, so a single bush will still fruit
- Minimal feeding needed; avoid over-fertilizing
- Naturally resistant to most pests and diseases
- Little watering needed once established

HARVEST & WASH

Clusters ripen to a deep black-purple in late summer and can hang on the bush for weeks without spoiling, so there's no rush. Rinse well before use. Fresh berries are quite astringent; most people cook them into jams, syrups, or juice rather than eating them out of hand.



Serviceberries & Honeyberries

Amelanchier spp. & Lonicera caerulea

Two different plants, grouped here because they share the same appeal: native or near-native, very cold hardy, and about as hands-off as fruit growing gets once established.

PLANTING

- **Serviceberry:** zones 4–9, full sun to partial shade, adaptable to most soils, grows as a large shrub or small tree (space 6–15 feet depending on type)
- **Honeyberry:** zones 2–7 — very cold hardy but struggles in hot, humid summers; plant two different varieties for pollination, space 4–5 feet apart

PRUNING

- Prune both while dormant, late winter
- **Serviceberry:** thin oldest stems at the base every few years; treat like a multi-stem shrub, not a cane fruiter
- **Honeyberry:** minimal pruning needed for the first 3–4 years; after that, remove oldest wood at the base to keep it productive

CARE & NEEDS

- Both are low-input once established; minimal feeding needed
- Serviceberry tolerates drought well; honeyberry prefers consistent moisture
- Net bushes if birds are beating you to the harvest — a common problem with both

HARVEST & WASH

Serviceberries ripen to a deep reddish-purple and taste like a cross between a blueberry and an almond; harvest by hand or strip clusters onto a sheet. Honeyberries are ready when fully deep blue inside and out, the skin colors before the inside is ripe, so taste-test before a full harvest. Rinse both gently just before eating.

Know Your Cane, At a Glance

● THE LEAFLET RULE (BLACKBERRIES, RASPBERRIES & WINEBERRIES)

Three leaflets means the cane is a floricanes, fruiting now or about to. Once it finishes fruiting, cut it to the ground.

Five leaflets means the cane is a primocane, first-year growth. Top it off at 3–4 feet to push out lateral shoots, next year's fruit.

● EXCEPTIONS: WHEN THE 3/5 RULE DOESN'T APPLY AS-IS

Everbearing raspberries and **primocane-fruiting blackberries (like Prime-Ark)** fruit on first-year, 5-leaflet growth instead of waiting to become a floricanes. Check your variety tag before pruning.

Wineberries are floricanes-only, so the rule applies as written. **Black raspberries** are mostly 3-leaflet on both primocanes and floricanes, so leaflet count doesn't distinguish them — go by cane color and texture instead.

● A CANE WITH BOTH?

Totally normal. That's a floricanes showing older five-leaflet growth and newer three-leaflet growth now that it's shifted into fruiting mode. Cut it down once it's done fruiting.

● PROPAGATING FROM CUT TIPS

Yes — tip layering (bending a tip down and burying it in soil while still attached to the parent) roots far more reliably than a loose cutting. Give it a few extra weeks after roots form before severing it from the mother plant.

● NO LEAFLET RULE

Strawberries (runners); blueberries, elderberries, currants, gooseberries, aronia, serviceberries & honeyberries (shrubs); and mulberries (a tree).

● WHEN TO PRUNE

Brambles: cut floricanes right after fruiting. Shrubs & trees: prune in late winter, fully dormant.



*"It's never too late to design a flourishing life —
and a well-tended berry patch is a pretty good
place to start."*

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