Help! I am caught in my raspberry patch and can’t get out!

Are you afraid to send the kids out into the back yard? Is your neighbor ready to spray industrial strength herbicide onto your plants, which have also jumped into his yard? Do you lose your dog more than once a week? If so, your landscape may be suffering from overgrown raspberry syndrome and I may be able to help.

We will talk about pruning raspberries. Not blackberries. Although they may look similar, there is a difference. Blackberries always have a white core or center present in the fruit when they are picked. Raspberries are cup-shaped and hollow in their centers. Both blackberries and black raspberries grow wild here in Minnesota, but only black raspberry varieties are readily cultivated in our state. Blackberry varieties are only marginally hardy here at best, but cold hardy and good producing cultivars may soon become available.

I am assuming that you do want to tame that backyard jungle, and maybe even enjoy the fruits/raspberries of your labor. Maybe the problem is improper pruning, or total lack of pruning? To increase your production, and reduce disease and pest problems, let’s prune properly each year.

The cure begins with a knowledge of how raspberries grow. Raspberries are perennial plants that come back year after year. Each season raspberries produce above ground stems, called canes. These canes are biennial, that is, they last for only two years and then they die. The roots and crowns of the plants remain year after year. New canes sprout up each year and replace the canes that have died.

Gardeners call the first season canes primocanes (primary canes). In the second season, these very same canes are called floricanes (secondary or flowering canes). The floricanes die after fruiting in the second season. New primocanes sprout up and replace those dead floricanes. Red or yellow raspberries sucker badly, popping up new canes (primocanes) all over the place from underground runners.

**Red or yellow raspberries:**

There are two categories of red or yellow raspberries.

(1) Summer-bearing raspberries are planted in rows and produce primocanes in the first season. These primocanes overwinter and are now called floricanes. It is only these floricanes that produce a bountiful crop of berries in the midsummer of their second season. The floricanes will die after fruiting. New primocanes will replace the dead canes each summer.

After the summer-bearing raspberries have fruited, it is time to prune out those spent floricanes. You may choose to do the removal pruning right away, or you may want to prune later. In late winter or early spring, if you have not done so already, prune out those dead floricanes left over from the previous season. They will be grayish brown and dead looking.

Continue pruning to remove any weak canes. Remove any other canes in order to narrow the row of raspberries to 12 to 18 inches wide. Cut out additional canes so that only 6-8 large-diameter canes remain per linear foot of row. This whole process may seem like you are removing a lot of vegetation and even butchering the plants, but the end result will be vigorous and healthy canes that receive plenty of sunshine to produce a wonderful crop. Finally, shorten any canes that have grown over 5 feet tall. Be careful to remove less than 25% of the cane height.

(2) Fall-bearing raspberries are also known as ever-bearing raspberries, and are also grown in rows. Again, we have the first season primocanes and the second season floricanes. However, the difference with fall-bearing raspberries is that the primocanes will set buds at the tips of the canes in late summer. These raspberries will produce a fall crop in August or September. During the next season, these very same canes are called floricanes. The floricanes will now produce a crop on the lower portions (sides) of the canes in the midsummer of their second season. Again, these floricanes will die after fruiting. New primocanes will replace these dead canes. Thus, these raspberries are capable of producing both a fall crop and a summer crop.
Fall-bearing raspberries may be pruned exactly like summer-bearing raspberries. When pruning in late winter or early spring, in addition to the other tasks, prune off the dead remains of blossoms at the tops of plants that fruited last fall.

Many gardeners simplify their pruning of fall-bearing raspberries by growing only one crop. In late winter or early spring, they mow down or cut down all canes to within an inch of the ground. Thus, all floricanes (second year canes) are eliminated. A new flush of primocanes will appear and bear fruit in the fall. While these new canes are growing, do not prune or remove the tips of the canes. Thinning is not usually necessary, but weak and diseased canes should be removed. Narrow the row to 12 to 18 inches.

Growing fall-bearing raspberries as a single, late season crop has many advantages. Pruning is simple and easy. You avoid worry about an extremely cold winter which might freeze the fruit buds. You don’t get fruit buds until the primocanes start growing in the warmth of spring. Less disease and insects are carried over from last season. The quality and size of the fruit is improved. The primocanes will grow stronger because there is no competition from this year’s floricanes for sunlight, water, and nutrients. However, overall yield may be reduced by 10-20% by growing just a single crop.

**To tame your red or yellow raspberry jungle:** Rows of red or yellow raspberries should be at least 6 feet apart. Dig out all canes except those in the hedgerows. Remember to keep the plants within the rows to a width of 12 to 18 inches. To prevent new canes from popping up in unwanted areas, the bare soil between rows may be covered with cardboard and then with a layer of organic material such as wood chips, pine needles, or straw. If any sprouts make it through the mulch, dig them out. Prune as described above.

**Black or purple raspberries:** These raspberries do not grow in hedgerows like the reds or yellows. Instead, they grow in isolated groups or clumps called “hills”. The term hill does not refer to an area of raised soil, but rather to a grouping of canes. These hills should be spaced at 4 feet apart.

Black or purple raspberries do not sucker from underground roots. Instead they remain in clumps, except for arching canes that can grow up to 20 feet or more in length. As soon as the tip of one of these canes touches soil, a new plant is rooted at that spot. The process continues, and if left unchecked, you soon have a jungle of arching canes and rooted new plants.

To prune black or purple raspberries: in the spring select and keep 4 to 5 strong canes (at least ½ inch in diameter) per hill. Cut all other canes to the ground. Cut back all side branches so they are 12 to 18 inches long. In the summer, pinch off (“tip”) 2-3” from the tip of each new shoot when the primocanes reach 24 to 30 inches in height (Some universities in other states recommend tipping at 36 or even 48 inches). This encourages the growth of side branches. Stop tipping the plants in August. Resulting plants are stocky, self-supporting, and have a large amount of productive wood. Again, this may seem to be an extreme treatment, but the end result is easier to pick fruit and increased production. After harvest, cut down all canes that bore fruit.

**To tame your black or purple raspberry jungle:** Follow the above directions for taming red or yellow raspberries, except make the rows at least 8 feet apart. Dig up excess plants within the row itself, so that hills are spaced 4 feet apart.

I hope that I have not scared you away from raspberries. Every sunny garden can add at least five plants as a deliciously edible backdrop to the lower growing annuals, perennials, and smaller shrubs. Give raspberries a try.

Further information on varieties, growing, fertilization, and support systems for raspberries may be found at [Raspberries for the Home Garden](http://www.extension.umn.edu/garden/yard-garden/fruit/raspberries-for-the-home-garden/) and [Growing Raspberries in Wisconsin](http://learningstore.uwex.edu/Assets/pdfs/A1610.pdf).

Happy Gardening,

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