

GREEN INVESTMENT — old style

BLACKBERRIES—a storied fruit

In the story *Beauty and the Beast*, the Beast lived in a castle that was surrounded by a thick wall of blackberries. We have a vegetable garden like that. At our home on the Black River, wildlife moves up and down the shoreline daily. I wanted to keep larger animals like deer out of the vegetables so I surrounded the garden with a five foot wire fence. A deer could still jump that so I planted blackberry canes along the perimeter. The blackberries would weave into and climb over the fence to make a solid wall. There are broadly two types of blackberries, some with thorns and some without. Both yield good fruit. The thorny ones are more productive and can survive colder winters. The thornless ones are easier to pick because you need not shed blood to gather fruit. I wasn't sure that the thornless ones would survive the County winter.

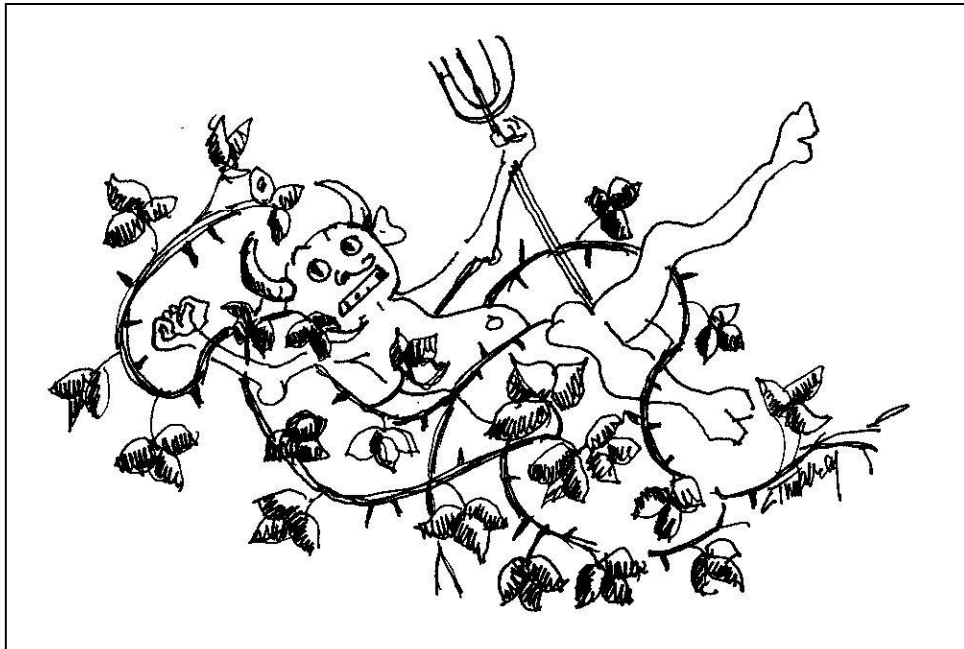
Well, both have grown well but the thorny type grew much more quickly, spreading though underground root extensions and popping up at every available space. The thornless type spread when their long arching branches reach the ground and the growing tips reroot...not quite as efficient and more vulnerable to cold spells.

Blackberries (known as Brambles in Europe) produce fruit only on second year canes. To have a good crop of blackberries you should cut and remove the older canes at the end of the growing season. Removing the many thorny canes is particularly onerous requiring thick gloves and eye protection lest the thorns extract body parts. Over several weeks in the late fall, wheelbarrows heaping with pruned canes are moved to our winter burn pile.

Technically these aren't 'berries' at all but rather 'drupes' (like raspberries). Instead of each seed being wrapped in a juicy skin as with true berries, drupes are clusters of small cells each containing a seed. It is the mass of these protruding soft knobs that led the makers of that early

cell phone to select the name for their company...the many soft buttons on the key pad recalling the texture of the fruit.

The berries are tasty and nutritious, being particularly high in calcium, manganese and Vitamin K (which helps blood clotting which comes in handy!). Yesterday, I read an article in the *Journal of Agriculture and Chemistry* that claimed that eating blackberries proved effective against age-related neurodegenerative disease as well as loss of bone density. A much earlier health claim (Medieval times) suggested that eating these protected against incantations and curses. The fruit begins to ripen in early July and Irish mythology says that for good luck the first ripe berries should be left for the fairies. A Biblically-inspired story says that when St. Micheal threw Satan out of heaven (Old Michaelmas Day) he landed on a Blackberry patch and in anger at the thorns, he spit on the plants. An Old British tale advises that after the date of this expulsion (October 10—aka Devil's Spit Day,) the berries should no longer be eaten due to that contamination (coinciding with fall season surface mold). Doctors long ago thought that regular blood-letting was helpful and I can attest that pruning old blackberry canes can assist with that.



From my experience, if I was planting them for the first time again in the County's climate I'd stick with the thornless type. They aren't as productive and they might not be quite as tasty but they are much easier to gather. And, if you decide to eliminate your patch it would be easy to prevent the tip-rooting thornless ones from reproducing where-as the vast under-

ground network of thorny runners would prove stubborn.

- By Robin Reilly

At their Black River Forest Garden, the Reilly's raise many types of plants and animals within a larger project to restore a diverse meadow and forest landscape.

