

Hays Berry Farm: Grower Spotlight

My name is Robert Hays and I am the owner of Hays Berry Farms. My Farm is located in northeast Mississippi near Tupelo. I started growing blackberries in 2000 with 6 plants, and now I have over 9 miles of trellised blackberries. I will have more plants coming in the next few weeks.

I do not use any fertilizers, insecticides or herbicides. The only thing I use for weed control is Vinegar and water. I have 9 varieties of blackberries to date: 1) Navaho, 2) Arapaho, 3) Apache, 4) Natchez, 5) Oauchita, 6) Osage, 7) Triple Crown, 8) Black Satin, and 9) Sweetie Pie.

I have experimented with several types of trellises over the years but have settled on the fence row style. I have my trellises at 5-6 foot centers and the plants are spaced in the row, anywhere



from 3ft- 5ft depending on the variety. The way that I tie the vines and canes to the trellises still allow plenty of room for air flow as well as sunlight into the field. Most growers produce on average 2.5 gallons of berries per plant on the same varieties that I am getting an average of 4.25 gallons.



I use various things for insect control on my farm: 1) Yellow and Blue sticky tapes and traps that attract Aphids, Thrips, Leaf Rollers and Leaf Miners. I have traps out for the SWD fruit fly. I also have 150 hummingbird feeders scattered out over the 6 plus acres of blackberry field. Hummingbirds eat a tremendous amount of insects, especially while they are

feeding young. In North Ms. Hummingbirds will have as many as 5 sets of young per season. I am also doing ongoing research for the control of the SWD.



If you are wondering what type of land I have on my farm, it is all hills and hollows (or should I say gullies). So to be able to farm I have to terrace the sides of the hill off to have flat land for farming. My terraces are anywhere from 20ft-35ft wide, depending on the lay of the land. Besides having a side of a hill I also had gullies to fill in to get the flat land to farm.

I sell to 40 restaurants, 4 bakeries, 4 fruit stands, I had people from 7 states come to pick their own berries this year. I ship to several overseas customers. I have a huge market in U.K, Israel, and this year I already have someone preorder 200 gallons from Finland (already paid for the berries and shipping just waiting for the berries to get ripe to freeze and ship to them). Also

I go to 19 farmers markets, while at the farmers markets I have as much space on my tables for advertising as I do for my berries.

(Looking at display):

- 1) Some customers only want one variety of berry for their needs and why. (eg tart for jellies, sweet for fresh, etc.)
- 2) After I set up table at market I go and talk to customers, doing survey about whether they like blackberries and tell them about the guy at the booth that has so many varieties of berries that are so big and pretty. I tell about if you like sweet he has them and if you prefer tart that can be had at his table. Tell the potential customer that the man has samples of each to taste.
- 3) After I get through talking to that person I go pigeonhole another to talk to. The whole time I am keeping an eye on my table so when any of the people I talked to, get close to the table I head off in that direction.
- 4) IF THE PERSON ISNT WANTING BERRIES: I find out what they are looking for and point them to several vendors that have what they want.
- 5) Keep in mind also I only do this at the markets that I am the only berry seller there or there in only one other vendor that has 4-6 gallons of berries, and I wait until he sells out.

I also harvest the leaves from the plants coming up in the walk areas to dry for making tea. I sell dried leaves crushed and in 1 cup amounts for \$1.50 per pack at my farmers markets. Last year I sold 1,000 zip lock bags of dried leaves. This is an added revenue that would otherwise be lost if I just cut the plants down to ground level.

I am also talking to a couple of convenience stores about having a small amount in their coolers for sale to their customers. These stores already have an area for fresh tomatoes on their stands, so the door is already open for my talks with them.

TRELLISING My Trellis system allows me to spread my vines and canes out in a zigzag way to maximize the amount of sunlight each leaf gets. It also allows for my beneficial insects to get to the harmful insects and eat them. It will also allow me to be able to spray IF AND WHEN it becomes necessary. I do not spray chemicals because I am against it BUT because I try to be as healthy as I can. When insects do become more than my natural methods can handle I will be spraying whatever is necessary to have a crop to sell. I do not prune any of the vines until they are through bearing fruit. The more leaves on the plants the energy is produced for the fruits to



get ripe and also to store up as much energy for next seasons growth.

HOWEVER, if I find a vine with the damage from cane borers then I will cut that vine out. BUT when I make these cuts on the plants, I will take a small piece of plastic wrap SARAN or REYNOLDS wrap and put over the cut ends and use a rubber band to hold it in place. I do this to help keep Virus and disease spores from getting into the fresh cut wounds of my vines.



I have used these different tying materials: Cotton string, Zip ties, Ripped pieces of cloth, Baling twine, Twist ties from garbage bags

And now I use electrical wire. The photos above show how I tie plants to wires of trellises. It is also easy to just pull the wires off at end of season.

I don't prune because of potential insect damage, and because it is less likely to get diseases and viruses from the open wounds, etc.



Mulches

I have experimented with several types of mulches over the years.

I started with using pine needles or pine straw. I prefer using this material as much as I can. It doesn't blow away in the wind and wash away in heavy rains. It will take a full year to decompose to make the soil richer.

The next thing I have used one year was half-rotten hay. I thought that with it being so far decomposed to start with I would not have to worry about grass seeds being viable. Boy was I wrong! Until I used the hay I did not have any grass anywhere in my field of berries. But after using 7 round bales of this hay I got a full farm of weeds and grasses -- to the extent that I decided it would be too much labor to get rid of them and decided to start mowing and weed eating the farm.

I now use a lot of leaves collected from the nearest city. The street department calls me when they see bags of leaves beside the road to pick up. Last year I hauled over 4500 bags of leaves to my farm and this did not even cover $\frac{1}{2}$ of the farm. I will use any leaves, Oak, Pecan, Magnolia, Walnut, anything that will decompose to enrich my soil and help retain moisture in the fields can and will be used.

This coming year I have found a small supply of shredded car tires that I will be using on about a 25ft row of berries. I am hoping this works out very well. I know it will keep weeds from coming up in the rows, but I don't know if it will inhibit the new canes in any way from coming up also. Then the next concern is how much it will heat up the roots of the berry plants. Most of the roots are within an inch of the top of the soil and where I have added mulch each year the roots are actually in the older mulch that has composted down and above the actual soil.

