

Pruning Topic: Raspberries

by Cass Turnbull

50 Cents

Not much has given me more pleasure than the tiny raspberry patch I planted 23 years ago in my backyard. Every summer I pad out there, sometimes in my socks, to raid the bush. I pick the darkest berries, perhaps with a bit of white showing at the top where they are already trying to slip off, a maximum ripeness indicator. Yum, yum. Those that release easily are the sweetest. Miraculously, the raspberry bush that I plunder today will provide a new crop of ripe berries tomorrow. And I encourage my neighbors to pick them too. The more you pick, the bigger the remaining berries get. You can't "over-harvest"—you just get more. And they're free! You can't beat free.

And the people from PETP (People for the Ethical Treatment of Plants) want me to let you know that fruits (and maybe nuts) are the only plant parts that actually want you to eat them. Think about it.

For me, the annual grazing of raspberries captures the essence of summer—that and the smell of sun-warmed conifer needles underfoot.

What seems obvious to me is not so obvious to others. During a recent garden consultation, the new homeowner asked how to prune the raspberries. I told him to remove the old, dead canes by cutting them off at ground level. The dead ones looked dead to me—all dry, grey and brittle. He said he thought maybe he was supposed to keep those, because they were "the good ones" that had berries in the summer. Hmmm.

So here is raspberry pruning, at least for "regular old" raspberries.

Each spring, raspberries grow new, bright green canes. They just have leaves, no flowers or fruit. But the next spring they get flowers that turn into raspberries that ripen in July. Then they die at the end of the year, turning into those dry, brittle, grey canes. After they are through fruiting, or during your fall-winter "clean up", you cut them off and throw them into the compost. What is left in the raspberry patch are the greener one-year-old canes. They will bear fruit next summer.

Pretty straightforward, right? But wait! The hybridizers got to work and invented the "ever-bearing" or "fall-bearing" raspberries. I call them the "confusion-bearing" raspberries. I was on a radio garden show, when somebody called to ask how to prune them. I hemmed and hawed. The host, certain

that it couldn't be all that hard, googled it. Reading aloud, I could see the cloudy look come over his eyes.

So here goes the spiel on fall- or ever-bearing raspberries: The first year a cane grows up and flowers and bears raspberries on the top half of the cane, in the fall. The cane overwinters and bears fruit on the bottom half in June or early July, the summer. Then it dies. If you want to (you do not have to), you can cut the top half off after it fruits in the fall. Then the bottom half fruits the next year (in the summer) and you cut the rest of the cane out to the ground coz it's pretty much dead now.

Since your raspberry patch will be made up of both one- and two-year-old canes, you should be harvesting raspberries in both the summer (last year's bottoms) and fall (this year's tops). Hence the term "ever-bearing".

Some of you now understand how to prune ever-bearings. It all makes perfect sense to you. The rest of you have read the previous paragraph a couple of times. You thought you understood, but by the end of the day you couldn't explain it to your neighbor, or on a radio program. My advice to you is to just do what's "obvious" by looking at the patch. Cut out the "finished" tops, and the completely finished, dead-looking canes to the ground. Or forget the cutting in-half part and just cut the completely dead ones out. Leave the live-looking ones. That oughta work.

Please—don't worry too much. It's not like your raspberries will stop bearing fruit if you don't prune them. The patch will just get clogged with a bunch of old dead canes. Which reminds me. Although I am a far, far cry from being an expert on raspberries or pruning "soft fruit", I have made the following observation. Raspberries want to colonize. They keep creeping out from the center and all the really good canes seem to be at the edges. That makes them a bit hard to manage. Recently, a lady asked me if she could keep a clump of raspberries in a pot. I told her it might get to be difficult after a while.

And, for those of you who are as yet un-stymied by the pruning of ever-bearing raspberries, I proffer a third option. Mary Robson answered the question (How would you prune ever-bearings?) in the newspaper as follows. "You did ask how I would prune them, so I'll tell you. I would cut all the canes to the soil line. This is not only super easy but it also allows the plants to put all their energy into making new canes and the biggest fall crop possible. (For summer fruit I'd add a couple of June-bearing cultivars like Willamette, Chillawack or Centennial to my planting.)"



Regular Raspberries - Year 1



Regular Raspberries - Year 2



Regular Raspberries - Year 3 – Dead



Everbearing Raspberries - Year 1



Everbearing Raspberries - Year 2



Everbearing Raspberries - Year 3 Dead

*What a happy life it would be, only to cultivate raspberries.
--Alice B. Toklas*

Ian Taylor, the author of *The Naked Gardener*, was kind enough to share some of his gardening wisdom on raspberries.

- 1) The new canes can get mighty tall. I've found it beneficial to cut them off at 6 feet, at the same time cutting out the old canes. That gives them the winter to get over it.
- 2) I'm going to start pruning as I harvest. The trouble, I find, is that the new canes crowd and smother the year-old fruit-bearing canes, making harvesting difficult. Cutting out a branch from which all the berries have been harvested reduces the crowding, and opens up space to see other berries hiding back there.

We've had three raspberry pies and I've made six pints of jam—and those berries are still coming! I'm with Alice. What a wise woman.