

Title: An Alternative Systems Approach to Blackberry Production

Progress Report

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Objectives:

1. To evaluate the value of trellising in commercial, erect blackberry production
2. To evaluate the yield, berry size and berry quality of and alternate year bearing blackberry production system.
3. To evaluate the economic feasibility of an alternate year bearing blackberry production system.

Justification:

Interest in blackberry fruit has increased dramatically as knowledge of the health benefits associated with their consumption increases. Opportunities exist in blackberry production for growers searching to find alternate crops. The availability of erect, thornless blackberry cultivars has encouraged many growers to consider commercial blackberry production.

Blackberry production is a high labor enterprise. For optimum yields and to reduce the potential for pest problems, plants should be pruned several times throughout their lifespan. With both primocanes and floricanes existing in the planting simultaneously, the pruning operation cannot be mechanized to a very large degree resulting in a large expenditure in time and labor for growers. Although certain thornless blackberry cultivars can be grown without the use of a support system, yields and ease of management of the planting can be enhanced through the use of some type of trellis, resulting in increased expenditures in materials and labor.

Several training systems which offer the potential to reduce labor inputs in pruning are being explored. Trellis systems can be utilized to retain the productive advantage for canes taller than recommended for freestanding plants and to separate floricanes and primocanes within the row which should result in increased fruit quality and pruning efficiency. Alternate year harvest should greatly lessen pruning costs as floricanes can be mowed off during the winter following fruiting. However, since this would also result in destruction of primocanes, that field would not fruit the following year. Having two blocks of blackberries where the sequence of fruiting followed by mowing are staggered would be necessary to achieve annual production. Yield reduction on a given area of land would be expected to be less with this system than where a field of equal size was managed for a crop every year. However, if the yield reduction was not excessive, the lower costs involved in alternate year cropping might result in an increased net profit.

Methodologies:

Tissue cultured, virus indexed Apache blackberry plants were purchased from Cedar Valley Nursery in Centralia, WA. in 2003. A site was prepared at the Plateau Experiment Station in Crossville, TN and the planting was established in mid-June 2003. Extended cool, overcast conditions at the nursery slowed plant growth resulting in delayed shipment of the plants. Irrigation was begun at the time of planting as per the recommendations of the nursery. Survival of the plants was good; however, very little new growth occurred the summer of planting. Due to this lack of growth, the summer of 2004 was devoted to establishing the planting. The planting was sufficiently developed to yield a partial crop during the summer of 2005 and to allow the establishment of the proposed treatments. The research proposal was set up to cover a 5 year period in anticipation of the time it would take to initiate the following treatments:

1. Freestanding with floricanes removal

- top primocanes at 42 inches, remove floricanes immediately after fruiting, head laterals to 12 – 18 inches in late winter, remove laterals on lower 18 inches of canes, remove weak canes and thin remaining canes to 4 – 6 per linear foot of row.

2. Freestanding with no floricanes removal

- top primocanes at 42 inches, no floricanes removal, no pruning on laterals

3. 2-wire vertical trellis (wires at 3 ft. and 5 ft. aboveground)

- top primocanes at 65 inches, remove floricanes after harvest, prune laterals and thin canes as described in treatment 1.

4. V-system (2 wires 60 inches aboveground and 30 inches apart)

- As primocanes grow, they are pulled to one side, secured to the wire and topped about 12 inches above the wire. The following year, primocanes are

secured to the opposite wire. This results in harvesting alternate sides of the trellis each year. Floricanes are removed following harvest. Laterals are headed and canes are thinned in late winter.

5. Alternate row harvest

Half of the treatment is mowed off in winter every other year with the other half being mowed during alternate years. Elimination of floricanes from the “primocane only” rows should result in more primocane growth and greater fruit production the following year. Primocanes in the “primocane only” sections are headed at 42 inches. Laterals on the sides of the rows adjacent to the drive areas will be mowed to a length of 12 to 18 inches in late winter. Laterals within the row will not be pruned.

6. Alternate row harvest with primocane suppression

- Same as treatment 5 except that new primocanes in the floricanes fruiting row will be suppressed (by hand tipping or through the use of selected herbicides) until the beginning of harvest on one-half of the canes and until after harvest on the other half. The effect of primocane competition with floricanes will be determined by comparing treatments 4 and 5.

7. Mowing immediately after harvest to determine if sufficient primocane growth will

occur to give acceptable yields the following year. (It soon became apparent that primocane growth following fruiting would not be adequate to produce acceptable levels of fruiting therefore this treatment is being modified to a “V-system” similar to that described in treatment 4, except that floricanes will be pulled to both sides of the V each year. The primocanes will be allowed to grow straight up between the floricanes so they will not interfere with floricanes removal following harvest.)

Results

Following several weeks of near record high temperatures in late March and early April, temperatures plummeted on April 4 and advective freezes with low temperatures of 19 degrees F were experienced for several consecutive nights at the Plateau Research and Education Center in Crossville, TN. As a result, the blackberry crop was decimated. In addition, cold injury to floricanes was experienced resulting in considerable dieback.

Conclusions

Severe drought pressure was partially offset by irrigation. However, with the losses due to crown gall and the reduced primocane growth, the potential for realizing additional meaningful results is in question. Work will continue on the project and a decision regarding its future will be made in spring of 2008.