Grow Your Own Organic Blackberries
By Jerald Larson, CEA
Fort Valley State University Extension Program
(Emanuel, Burke and Jefferson Counties)

Varieties such as Kiowa and Apache will have increased vigor and plant size as well as higher yields if grown on a 3’ wide double dug bed. Space the plants 5’ apart for Apache and 7’ for Kiowa. Provide a 6 ½ foot tall, three wire trellis to support the canes in a fan like pattern. The drawing as well as the list of materials explain the details and costs of construction. The order of tightening wires should be from the top to the bottom.

The bed should be prepared by double digging (or spading machine) in early January using 3’ x 35’ as a convenient size to accommodate a trellis for 2 Kiowa and 4 Apache. According to a soil test, apply lime, rock phosphate, and green sand, as needed. Obtain well rooted plants from a certified nursery in time to set the plants in the soil mid-February to mid-March. Apply about two pounds of organic fertilizer in an 18” diameter circle around each plant and stir it in the surface. In mid-February of the second and succeeding years apply 3 pounds per plant in a 30” diameter circle. Mulch the plants and the entire bed with 4-6” of well weathered hay or straw. Replenish this mulch in mid-summer and at least twice per year in the future. Use a drip hose down the center of the bed and maintain good moisture.

Begin tying the canes to the trellis wire as they grow. A handy material to use for tying is plastic surveyors marking tape. It should be tied in a figure 8 to prevent the wire from chafing the canes. As shown in the diagram a fan pattern is desired, including looping long laterals back to the wires. At an early stage all lateral shoots below 12” – 15” on each cane should be pruned out. The goal is to get an even distribution of sunlight for optimum growth, flowering, and fruit ripening. Remember, the canes develop the first season and then flower and fruit the second season. Also, during the second season and succeeding seasons replacement canes are produced for next years crop. As soon as the harvest is finished each season (by mid-July), the fruited canes should be pruned out, wires tightened and the replacement canes tied to the trellis. Timely pruning encourages better replacement cane development and higher yields for the following year. As the canes and laterals continue to grow, weekly watering, as well as additional tying and/or pruning is needed in mid August and mid September. Withhold watering November through February.

Kiowa has ripe fruit (dull black color) from mid-May to mid-June in our area, while Apache is ripe mid-June to mid-July. Kiowa averages 1 1/4” to 1 1/2” long berries which are slightly sweet. Apache has an average berry length of 1 to 1¼” and is moderately sweet. Since Kiowa yields as much as 24 pints per plant and Apache about 14 pints (the fourth frueting season), the average family may choose to plant 2 Kiowa and 4 Apache. However, blackberries are self pollenating and may be grown alone as individual varieties.

During the fourth frueting season, Apache replacement canes were of lower vigor and developed cane disease on the Boggs heavy clay subsoil. A separate farm trial for Apache on a lighter sandy loam is showing higher plant vigor and yields as well as strong disease free replacement canes in the fourth season. An estimated 15-20% of Apache fruit each year have been affected by a problem of white druplets, which may be due to sunburn or stinkbugs.

Kiowa at Boggs in the fifth frueting season (2004) was affected by double blossom blight and the yield dropped 75%. During the sixth and seventh seasons, spot pruning of blighted frueting canes did not significantly reduce the disease. For the 2007 season all new canes are being cut weekly from mid April to mid July on Kiowa and Chickasaw. After all fruited canes are removed, the vegetative (new) canes will be allowed to grow.
Trellis Components, and Costs

Three  8' Steel T-posts (3 X 6.00)                  18.00
One    100' length - 16 gauge galvanized wire        4.10
One    50' length - flagging tape                    .80

Total       $22.90

Rev. 05/07