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The Berry Grower's Companion

Barbara L. Bowling
Timber Press (November 2000)
Unknown $29.95 (308pp)
978-0-88192-489-3

Legend has it that strawberry plants—which grew abundantly in Chile—were used four hundred and fifty years ago by the indigenous peoples as traps for infiltrating Spanish soldiers. “The Indians would place the plants in small, open spots in the forest, and when the soldiers dropped their weapons to pick the tempting morsels, they were sprung upon and attacked by the natives.”

That’s just one interesting item the author brings to light in her quest to share her knowledge and expertise with those wanting to know how to grow their own edible fruits—strawberries, raspberries, blueberries, blackberries, grapes, and other berry crops. Bowling, a former professor of Horticulture at Penn State University who lectures regionally and nationally, considers herself “an active educator of small fruit growers and enthusiasts.”

Her own enthusiasm for the subject is apparent throughout the book as she converses like an old friend. For example, she explains that while thorny blackberries taste very good, they aren’t grown as much “because the thorns present an obstacle in harvesting.” Then she admits, “OK, the thorns are nothing short of brutal.”

In the first two chapters, Bowling sets up her general principles for growing berries (site, soil, sunlight, and water are covered) and mentions some disadvantages—such as weeds, insects, diseases—and how to counter them. The next five chapters, each covering a single type of fruit, for example, the Brambles family, which includes raspberries, blackberries and their hybrids, follow the same pattern. A chapter on minor berry crops covers currants, gooseberries, kiwi, cranberry and edible honeysuckle.

Bowling first treats the reader to an historical background of the plant. She then discusses the biology of the plant, listing harvest times and much needed information on the many cultivated varieties that are rated on everything from hardiness and taste to disease-resistance and berry size. How to grow the plant from actual planting through to harvest (including proper plant nutrition, fertilization, and pruning) is covered, as are the diseases and insects specific to the berry plant being discussed—and the means to stop them.

Each chapter closes with a brief section of frequently asked questions such as “Why are my blueberry plant’s leaves so yellow (or red) in the early spring?” Answer: “Inefficient water pumping systems.”

Bowling concludes with a glossary of terms and sources of nurseries that can be used for purchasing berry plants.

ROBIN FARRELL EDMUNDS (January / February 2001)

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