

Wildcat District

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Blackberry Control

The year is 2025, and many blackberry plants in pastures bloomed before the end of April. In a typical year, we expect flowering in mid-May and into June. While some may find it exciting that blackberry cobblers may grace the table sooner rather than later, others will be frustrated that control protocols will have non-traditional timing.

The blackberries I'm referring to *can* be savored if you don't mind encountering mosquitos or snakes. Prairie blackberries have more seeds and smaller berries than their garden or grocery store counterparts. In pasture and hayfield situations, blackberries are a prickly, unwanted nuisance. Because of their thorns, most livestock avoid grazing near the plant to protect against mouth, eye, and bodily injury. Large thickets form and grazing acres are reduced when the plant is uncontrolled.

Blackberry is a common native, thicket-forming shrub. Under each plant is an extensive lateralgrowing root system that sprouts and produces additional plants. The rhizomatous root system is perennial, while the aboveground canes are biennial (living for two years). In the first year, the canes emerge and grow rapidly; in the second year, the canes bud, bloom, set fruit, and die to make way for new canes. Blackberries tolerate lower pH and low soil fertility than most forage grasses; they're quite competitive when soil pH and fertility are low.

Goats effectively control blackberries by continuously removing the leaves so the plant can't turn sunlight into food, effectively starving the plant. Goats won't get into the middle of thickets unless a path is mowed or the canes are smashed down by another method.

Mowing is an effective practice if the goal is to keep blackberry at a manageable size. However, control by mowing alone is ineffective. The large underground root structures are difficult to kill, and the cut stems resprout. This plant propagates from both seed and rhizome, so mowing at bloom reduces seed production but does little to stop the spread of the rhizomes.

Nonetheless, mowing can be a valuable complement to an herbicide protocol. Large, dense thickets often have dead canes with no leaves or two-year-old canes that possess old leaves. Old leaves can't absorb herbicide sprays as effectively as new foliage and are less susceptible to herbicide applications. Additionally, dead canes can intercept the spray and decrease herbicide

contact with susceptible foliage. Therefore, mowing reduces the size of the thicket and allows for a thorough herbicide application.

Herbicides should not be applied in the same growing season as mowing. The most effective strategy is to mow, wait for active regrowth the next season, and then spray. Allow at least 6 weeks after spraying to remove the dead blackberry plants. Removal will increase grazing acres for most livestock. However, removal too soon will prevent the herbicide from sufficiently affecting the underground system.

Blackberries are most sensitive to herbicides during bloom and in the fall before frost, and when they're not drought-stressed. Regardless of the plant and season, following label recommendations is imperative. Herbicides work in specific ways, and plants perform differently throughout the year. For example, plant activity during bloom drastically differs from its activity after seed set. When a pasture manager decides the time is right for control, the plant stage will determine which herbicide is appropriate.

With any plant control approach, remember that the problem did not develop overnight and will not be solved with one treatment. You'll need to re-treat for several years, combating the persistent seed bank and tenacious root system. For current herbicide recommendations, contact your local extension office or access K-State's <u>SRP1190 2025 Chemical Weed Control for Field Crops, Pastures, Rangeland, and Noncropland</u>.

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