



# GROWING CURRANTS AND GOOSEBERRIES IN YOUR HOME GARDEN

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Currants and gooseberries are closely related perennial bush fruits, both belonging to the genus *Ribes*. Their relatively small plant size, ease of culture, and distinctive, attractive fruit make them well suited for home gardens.

Black currants are prized for their distinctive flavor in juice, jam, jelly, pies, and other desserts. They're also rich in Vitamin C. Red currants are used mainly for jelly or wine. White currants are not as popular as black or red currants.

Gooseberries can have red or green-yellow fruit; eat them fresh or use them in jam, pies, and other desserts. It's easy to freeze both currants and gooseberries and keep them for later use.

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**Currants bear fruit in a cluster called a "strig."** Red currants are smaller and more tightly packed than black currants.

**Gooseberries are borne** singly, in pairs, or in small clusters.

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Cultural requirements are similar for all types. However, you should prune red currants and gooseberries differently from black currants. We'll discuss this later (see page 4).

## SELECTING A SITE

Gooseberries and currants are very hardy and can, therefore, be grown in most areas of the State.

Avoid frost pockets (areas into which cold air drains) — your plants will flower early in the spring. Planting on a slope reduces the risk of frost injury, and the improved air circulation reduces disease problems, especially powdery mildew.

If you live west of the Cascades, pick a spot in your garden that gets full sun.

If you live east of the Cascades, your hot summers call for partially shaded locations or slopes with north or northeast exposure. Either way, you'll reduce the leaf and fruit scalding that can occur in hot, dry climates.

**Soils.** Currants and gooseberries tolerate a wide range of soil conditions, but they perform best in a well-drained loam soil with an organic matter content greater than 1%. If your site is poorly drained, you can improve it by installing tile drains or building raised beds. You can improve heavy clay and sandy soils by adding organic matter.

Most currant and gooseberry cultivars (varieties) are alternate hosts for a disease called white pine blister rust. Although this disease doesn't cause excessive damage to these plants, five-needled pines (for example, white pines) are very susceptible.

If you have five-needled pines in your landscape, you may wish to plant a resistant gooseberry or currant cultivar — or consider another berry crop.

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**Illegal?** Planting gooseberries and currants used to be illegal in Oregon because they're alternate hosts for white pine blister rust. This ban has been lifted because there are so many wild *Ribes* species.

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## SELECTING A CULTIVAR

Red currants and gooseberries are generally self-fertile, and you need only one cultivar for fruit production. However, both types will produce larger fruit if you plant more than

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one cultivar and have cross-pollination. Some black currants are self-sterile and require a second cultivar for fruit production.

Here's a brief summary of cultivars that have been proven to grow well in North America.

### Red currants

*Cherry.* Fruit large, good quality; clusters small to medium-sized with short stems; plants spreading, large, and vigorous; resistant to powdery mildew.

*Perfection.* Mid-season; fruit large, crimson, sub-acid; clusters compact; plants upright with dense foliage and moderate vigor; susceptible to powdery mildew.

*Red Lake.* Late season; fruit large, light red, sub-acid; clusters long; plants productive, upright, vigorous.

*Stephens.* Mid-season; fruit very large, bright red, sub-acid; clusters medium to long; plants vigorous, somewhat spreading, productive.

*Viking.* Late; introduced from Europe by the USDA; plants are resistant to white pine blister rust.

*Wilder.* Mid-season; fruit large, dark red, sub-acid; clusters large, compact; plants large, upright to slightly spreading, dense, productive; fruit hangs well after ripening.

### White currants

These are less common than black or red currants. Their fruiting habit is similar to red currants, but the fruit are small, white, and translucent. *White Grape* and *White Imperial* are the most common cultivars available in North America.

### Black currants

Black currants are known for their strong flavor and high vitamin C content. Yields for black currants are less than those for red currants.

*Baldwin.* Late; fruit medium-large, firm to very firm; clusters short; plants very productive. Self-fertile.

*Consort.* Early mid-season; fruit medium-small, medium firmness, strong flavored; clusters medium in length; plants fair productivity; resistant to white pine blister rust. Self-fertile.

*Topsy.* Early; fruit large, firm, even-ripening; clusters medium in length; plants vigorous, very productive. Self-fertile.

New cultivars from Europe that may show promise include the powdery-mildew-resistant *Ben Nevis* and *Ben Lomond*.

### Gooseberries

They're divided into American and European types. Most gooseberries are thorny. American gooseberries are more disease-resistant, productive, and adaptable to varied climatic conditions than the European types.

**Jostaberry** is a cross of black currant with gooseberry. Fruit are borne in strigs like currants, but they get as big as gooseberries. They're black without hairs on the skin. Plants are 6 feet high at maturity, are thornless, have high productivity, and are resistant to mildew.

Cultivars include *Josta*, *Jostagranda*, and *Jostina*. *Jostagranda* and *Jostina* must be planted together for cross-pollination.

European cultivars are noted for their large and more flavorful fruit. However, they're very susceptible to powdery mildew. Only a few cultivars are commonly available in the United States.

### American types

*Captivator.* Mid-season; fruit medium-small, dull red when ripe, good quality; plants tall, vigorous, open, upright growth,

### Some of these cultivars may not be available

at your local nursery; there's less demand for currants and gooseberries than for other fruit crops. Mail-order nursery suppliers are an additional source of planting material. If you're interested in a new cultivar, try one or two plants first, to see if it grows well in your garden and if you like the fruit.

almost spineless, moderate productivity, fairly resistant to powdery mildew.

*Oregon Champion.* Mid-season; fruit medium-sized, round to oval, pale, whitish-green in color, tender, thin skin, juicy, tart; plants large, vigorous, upright to spreading, thorny, productive, susceptible to powdery mildew.

*Pixwell.* Fruit medium-sized, pink when ripe, in clusters; plants vigorous, productive, few thorns, resistant to powdery mildew.

*Poorman.* Early to mid-season; fruit large, oval-shaped, red when ripe, sweet with slightly aromatic taste; plants large, vigorous, upright to spreading, dense, productive with a long ripening period, thorns short and few.

### European types

*Careless.* Mid-season; fruit large, oval, pale-green to milky white when ripe, smooth with transparent skin, good flavor; plants moderately vigorous, upright to spreading.

*Clark.* Mid-season; fruit very large, red when ripe; plants spiny, short, moderately vigorous, fairly dense with many branches close to the ground, productive.

*Fredonia.* Mid-season; fruit large, red when ripe, somewhat difficult to pick; plants moderately productive, spiny, slightly short, moderate to fair vigor, upright and open growth.

## ESTABLISHING YOUR PLANTING

**Preparing the soil.** The average life span of currants is 10 to 15 years; for gooseberries, it's 15 to 20 years. So it's important to choose and prepare your site carefully.

Eliminate all perennial weeds the year before you plant. Don't let weeds go to seed!

Currants and gooseberries respond well to additions of organic matter, which improves aeration and drainage and increases water-holding capacity. You can apply organic matter the summer or fall of the year before you plant; manure applied at 2 to 3 bushels per 100 ft<sup>2</sup> is a good source.

You can also use compost, leaves, chopped hay or straw, peat moss, sawdust, etc. Take care to use only materials that are free of insects and weed seeds.

Dig, plow, or rototill the material into the soil to ensure that it will be well decomposed (rotted) by planting time the following spring. If you incorporate large amounts of nondecomposed (fresh) material into the soil, add ammonium nitrate (33% nitrogen) at 1 lb per 100 ft<sup>2</sup> to promote decomposition.

The site you select and prepare should drain well. However, if drainage is poor, you can take one of these steps:

- install a drain tile 25 inches deep near the row or
- form raised beds, 8 to 10 inches high.

**Fertilizing.** Gooseberries and currants grow best in a slightly acidic to neutral pH (5.5 to 7.0). Test the soil pH the year before you plant and adjust it if necessary. If the pH is below 5.5, add lime as recommended by the soil test.

Several days before you plant in the spring, apply 1 lb of 10-10-10 fertilizer (or equivalent) per 100 ft<sup>2</sup>. Work the fertilizer into the soil.

If you can't apply fertilizer before planting, apply ¼ lb 10-10-10 per plant 2 weeks after planting.

If you used manure to improve soil structure, decrease the rate of fertilizer you apply by one-half.

**Planting.** Plant healthy 1- to 2-year-old plants in early spring. Purchase bare-root or container-grown stock from a reputable nursery. Plant bare-root plants before they break dormancy (begin growth in the spring). It may be more satisfactory to purchase disease-free stock from a nursery, but plants can be propagated as outlined under "Propagation," page 5.

Space gooseberries and red currants 3 to 4 feet apart in rows. Black currants are more vigorous; space them 4 to 5 feet apart. Rows can be as close as 7 feet, but 8 to 10 feet allows for better air circulation in vigorous plantings.

Some people like to establish a solid hedgerow rather than having freestanding bushes. This is more common for black currant production than for red currants or gooseberries. To establish a hedgerow, set plants 2½ to 3 feet in the row.

Set plants about 2 inches deeper than they were growing in the nursery row or container. Firm the soil well to remove air pockets and water thoroughly after planting.

**Pruning.** At planting, prune all branches to a length of 4 to 6 inches. This stimulates new growth.

**Remove blossoms.** Strip off flower buds or blossoms that appear the year the plants are set, so that no crop is produced. Be patient! It's important that plants grow well the first year—flower and fruit production reduce shoot and root growth.

**Weed control and mulching.** Control weeds by shallow hoeing or cultivation. Mulching around the plants with sawdust or decomposed leaves is recommended: It conserves moisture, helps control weeds, and keeps the plant's roots cool.

The mulch should be 2 inches deep in the planting year. Fresh or undecomposed

mulching material may require additional fertilization above recommended rates.

**Watering.** Gooseberries and currants need about 1 inch of water per week, from fruit set through harvest. If natural soil water or rainfall doesn't supply this, you must irrigate.

## CARE OF ESTABLISHED PLANTS

**Adding mulch.** Add mulching material as required to attain a depth of about 4 inches once plants are mature. In row plantings, widen the mulched area to about 4 feet as plants become larger. As a rule, sawdust mulch decomposes at the rate of about 1 inch per year.

**Fertilizing.** For second-year plantings, apply about ¼ lb 10-10-10 fertilizer (or equivalent rate of a similar fertilizer) per plant. Apply this fertilizer when the buds are swelling in the spring. Spread it evenly around the plant, over an area about equal to the maximum spread of the bush, without touching the base or crown of the plant.

If you have applied fresh mulch to young plantings, the plants may require additional nitrogen. Increase the fertilizer rates as required if plants lack vigor or if the older leaves turn pale green to yellow.

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**When you choose a fertilizer,** remember that the three numbers refer to the percentages of nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P), and potassium (K) in the product. For example, 10-10-10 contains 10% N, 10% P, and 10% K.

Gooseberries and currants are sensitive to chloride, so pick a fertilizer with K in the form of potassium sulfate rather than potassium chloride.

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Increase rates slightly in the third year. Fourth-year and mature plantings should receive about ½ lb 10-10-10 per plant. Depending on plant vigor and site fertility, you can apply it only once in the spring or split it to encourage better seasonal growth. For split applications, apply ¼ lb 10-10-10 at budbreak and another ¼ lb in mid- to late June.

Always irrigate after applying fertilizer in summer.

If you apply manure in the fall, decrease the recommended fertilizer rates by one-half. In cold regions, manure applied in the fall may increase the risk of winter injury.

**Watering.** A uniform and adequate water supply is needed from bloom time until the end of harvest. If rain doesn't provide this water, you need to irrigate. Be sure to water plants during prolonged dry spells, after harvest until late August or early September.

However, avoid stimulating growth in late fall—this makes the plants more susceptible to winter injury.

When watering, add enough water to moisten the soil to a depth of 6 to 8 inches, then let the soil dry out somewhat before you water again. Excessive water may suffocate the roots.

**Pruning** Prune when the plants are dormant in late winter. Red currants and gooseberries fruit in a different way from black currants, so you should prune them differently.

#### *Red currants and gooseberries*

These produce most of their fruit on spurs that are located on 2- and 3-year-old wood. Canes (stems arising from the base of the plant) that are 4 or more years old are no longer productive; remove them when you prune.

After pruning, a healthy bush should have 9 to 12 main canes—3 to 4 each of 1-, 2-, and 3-year-old canes. Remove all canes older than 3 years and canes that are damaged or diseased. Prune to form an open center and remove canes that are low to the ground.

After planting, a yearly pruning schedule would look like this:

*Year 1.* At the end of the planting year, remove all but 6 to 8 of the most vigorous canes during the dormant period. Make your pruning cuts as close to the ground as possible.

*Year 2.* At the end of the second season, leave 4 or 5 new 1-year-old canes, and keep 3 or 4 of the 2-year-old canes.

*Year 3.* Keep 3 to 4 canes each from 1-, 2-, and 3-year-old growth.

*Year 4.* At the end of the fourth and following years, remove the oldest canes and keep 3 to 4 new 1-year-old canes to replace the older canes you removed.

#### *Black currants*

Black currants produce best on 1-year-old wood. Strong 1-year-old shoots and 2- or 3-year-old canes that have an abundance of strong 1-year-old shoots are the most productive.

When you prune, keep a total of 10 to 12 canes per mature bush—about half should be 1-year-old shoots. You can leave a few more shoots if the plant vigor is very high. Remove all shoots that are more than 3 years old. Make your pruning cuts close to the ground.

Because black currants bear most of their fruit on 1-year-old wood, you can prune them to produce on alternate years. In this system, prune plants to the ground during the dormant period. This causes the plant to produce many new shoots; no fruit will be produced the season after pruning. Don't prune the plants in the next dormant period, other than removing diseased wood or weak growth.

The following year, they fruit on the 1-year-old wood. Prune your plants to the ground again the following dormant period, repeating the cycle. In this system you get fruit produced every other year on a particular plant. To get fruit each year, you

can have half your plants fruiting in one year and the other half the next.

If you're growing black currants in a hedgerow, it's simplest to follow the alternate-year pruning method.

**Training to a trellis.** Currants and gooseberries can be grown as a fan-shaped bush on a trellis. Plants trained this way look attractive and produce a good crop of well-colored fruit.

To train to this system, plant rooted cuttings along a trellis with 3 to 5 wires. Space single plants at 3 to 4 feet. Tie side branches to the wires as they develop. To develop a narrow fruiting wall, use the pruning techniques mentioned for the type of currant or gooseberry you're growing.

This system requires a lot of labor and patience—only gardeners with a lot of experience should try it!

## HARVESTING

The year after planting, you can harvest a light crop. By the third or fourth year, plants usually bear full crops. A yield of 4 to 6 quarts per mature bush is considered good for red and white currants and gooseberries. However, yields for black currants are often only about half this amount.

The berries on a currant bush ripen over a 2-week period. Once a berry ripens, however, it can usually be left on the bush a week or more without dropping or becoming overripe. Therefore, you can harvest most of the berries on a bush in one or two pickings. If you pick more frequently, you may tend to pick berries that aren't fully ripe.

Pick black currants as individual berries. However, if you try to pick red currants as individual berries, you'll tear the fruit and lose a lot of juice. Therefore, pick the whole clusters (strigs) in red currants and strip the berries from the stems later, just before processing or eating. For making juice or jelly, you can crush the berries without removing them from the strig—you'll strain the product, anyway.

Gooseberries ripen over a 4- to 6-week period. Harvest them individually as they ripen. Some people harvest the berries when they've reached full size, but before they're fully ripe. They prefer these slightly immature berries for jams and pies.

Other people prefer fully mature or ripe berries—certainly, these are better if you eat them fresh!

To simplify harvest, you can spread a sheet of canvas or other material under the bush and knock the berries off the bush onto the canvas. In spiny cultivars, the spines may puncture some of the berries.

## PROPAGATION

**Currants and American-type gooseberries.** You can propagate these from cuttings. Take stem cuttings from 1-year-old wood during the dormant period. Make cuttings 6 to 8 inches long for currants and 10 to 12 inches long for gooseberries.

Make a flat bottom cut just below a bud, and a slanted top cut about ½ inch above a bud. You can take the cuttings in late fall and set them in a nursery bed immediately, or take them in late winter and store them in a plastic bag in the refrigerator until spring.

Set cuttings 6 inches apart in well-drained soil in a nursery area. Plant the cuttings deep enough so that only 1 or 2 buds extend

out of the soil. After 1 or 2 seasons' growth, you can plant rooted cuttings in their permanent location.

**European-type gooseberries** don't root well from cuttings. You can propagate them by layering or using "stool beds."

**Branch layering.** Bend down a branch, still attached to the plant, and partly cover it with soil. You may need to peg the branch down. You can do this in the fall or in the spring. Roots form along the branch where it touches the soil. After a season's growth, the branch should be rooted well enough to cut from the parent plant and dig. Often you can obtain several plants from a branch.

**Stool beds** require the use of a "stock" plant. Cut this stock plant back to the ground before growth starts in the spring. By early summer, it will have produced a large number of shoots. Mound soil around these shoots about half way to the tips—be careful to work the soil down between the shoots.

The covered parts of the shoots usually become rooted by fall. Cut the shoots below the rooted portion the following spring when they're still dormant. Plant in a permanent site or in nursery rows.

## PESTS

For pest control measures, check with your county office of the OSU Extension Service.

**Diseases.** Powdery mildew and leaf spot (anthracnose) are the most common.

**Powdery mildew.** Black currants and European-type gooseberries are especially susceptible to this fungus disease, characterized by a white powdery growth on young leaves and tips of new shoots in summer. It may spread over much of the bush; it often occurs on gooseberry fruits, but rarely on currant fruits.

Later, the white powdery growth becomes brown and feltlike. Heavily infested fruit take on a brown, rough coating that makes them unusable. Choose a site with good air

circulation, prune to an open bush shape, and plant resistant or tolerant cultivars. You can also control it with fungicides.

**Leaf spot or anthracnose** can be a problem in gooseberries and sometimes in currants. Infected leaves have brown spots and may turn yellow and drop prematurely.

**Insects.** The three most common problems are aphids, currant fruit fly (also known as gooseberry maggot), and currant borer.

**Currant fruit flies** emerge about the time currants or gooseberries are in bloom. The females lay eggs in developing berries. These hatch into maggots that feed inside the berries. Affected fruits ripen prematurely and may drop to the ground. A small white maggot will be found in each infested berry. Direct your control measures toward the adult flies.

**Currant borers** can cause serious damage to currants, and to some extent gooseberries. Adult moths lay eggs in the axils of leaves. The young larvae bore into the center of the shoot and feed there. The following spring, affected shoots often leaf out late, are sickly, and may die.

When you cut an injured shoot, you can see a dark hole where the larva has tunneled in the center. When you prune, remove canes below the tunneling and destroy them. Follow recommended pruning practices and don't let canes become too old.



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