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Currants and gooseberries for the home garden

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Quick Facts

- Currants and gooseberries have value both as ornamentals and fruits.
- Both currants and gooseberries are hardy and can be grown on poorer soils.
- Maximum yields and top quality fruit are produced on fertile, well-drained, loamy soils.
- Gooseberries may be picked green for pies and jams, or fully ripe for dessert quality fresh fruit.
- Red currants are preferred to alpine or golden currants for fruit.

Red currants (*Ribes sativum*) and gooseberries (*Ribes grossularia*) have ornamental as well as fruit value. Their hardiness and adaptability permit them to succeed where most other fruit crops fail. With proper variety and care, currants and gooseberries may be grown at elevations up to 10,000 feet (3,048 meters).

Varieties

Red currants are preferred for fruit production over Alpine or Golden currants. Red Lake produces a dark red, mild, sub-acid berry averaging three-eighths inches (1 centimeter). It is the most popular variety carried by local nurseries and is recommended for Colorado. Wilder, a variety similar to Red Lake but with larger clusters also is recommended. Zante currants actually are dried grapes (raisins) and should not be confused with currants.

Gooseberries recommended for Colorado are Pixwell and Welcome. Pixwell produces round one-half inch (1.3-cm) berries that are light green,

maturing to a soft pink. Welcome, which is sweeter and darker at maturity, also produces a one-half inch berry. Its thorns are not as numerous or stiff as Pixwell making it easier on the picker.

Both currants and gooseberries are self-fruitful, meaning only one variety is needed for fruiting.

Location and Soil

Currants and gooseberries grow best in full sunlight. However, they are tolerant of partial shade. A windbreak should be provided, otherwise drying winds may reduce plant growth and fruit size.

Maximum fruit production from currants and gooseberries is obtained in fertile, loamy, well-drained soils with a pH 6-7. However, since they produce some fruit in poor soils they lend themselves well as ornamentals for attracting wildlife in areas receiving infrequent watering.

A soil test is always best for determining fertility levels. However, in lieu of a soil test the following recommendations are made. If planted in good garden soil, the fruit plants need only a maintenance amount of fertilizer consisting of 4 pounds (1.8 kilograms) of ammonium sulfate and 2 pounds (.9 kg) of treble superphosphate per 1,000 square feet (90 square meters). However, if the soil has not produced a good garden, it should receive 8 pounds (3.6 kg) of ammonium sulfate, 4 pounds (1.8 kg) of treble superphosphate, 1 pound (.5 kg) of zinc sulfate, 1 pound (.5 kg) of iron chelate and 10 bushels (.4 cubic meter) of organic matter per 1,000 square feet (90 sq. m). These amendments should be worked in before planting.

Planting Currants and Gooseberries

Red currants and gooseberries are propagated from cuttings of one-year-old wood or through mound layering. They generally are sold as one- or two-year bareroot plants through mail-order nurseries. Local nurseries carry them

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growing in containers as two- or three-year-old plants. Planting should be done in early spring in rows 3.5 to 4.5 feet (1.1-1.4 m) apart and 6 to 8 feet (1.8-2.4 m) between rows. Prior to planting all damaged roots and branches of bareroot stock should be pruned out. Branches should be cut back to 5 inches (13 cm) and plants set 1 to 2 inches (3-5 cm) below the plant soil line. Water plants in well.

Care and Maintenance

Weeds should be controlled to minimize competition and maximize yield. Currants and gooseberries respond well to a heavy mulch of straw or similar material. When straw is used, nitrogen should be applied at the rate of 1 part per 100 parts of dry matter. Mulch reduces weeds, water needs and winter injury to roots caused by alternate freezing and thawing.

Adequate irrigation is necessary to maximize fruit size and yield. However, after harvest the amount of water applied should be reduced gradually to harden the plants prior to winter. A final watering should be done in November, to reduce desiccation during the winter.

Pruning

Pruning is necessary to maximize yield. Most fruit of red currants are borne on spurs (shortened fruiting branches) of two- and three-year-old wood. Some fruit also is borne near the base of one-year-old wood. Gooseberries are similar to currants but their one-year-old wood is more fruitful. In practice both are pruned similarly. Pruning is typically done in late winter or early spring prior to bud swelling. The object is to remove wood over three years in age and thin out younger wood. The resulting bush should have three upright canes each of three-, two-, and one-year-old wood. Gooseberries sometimes are pruned to remove more of the three-year-old wood while retaining more younger wood. See Figure 1.

Insects and Diseases

Currants and gooseberries are affected with a wide range of insects and diseases. These may be avoided by purchasing only quality, disease-free plants.

Insects most commonly observed are aphids, caneborers and red spider mites. Aphids are evident as small, soft-bodied, pear-shaped insects on the underside of leaves. Foliage, particularly the undersides, should be sprayed with malathion as directed on the label. Caneborers are small white grubs that bore into stems causing wilting of the upper portion of the cane. Control may be achieved by pruning well below the wilted tip and destroying the affected part. Red spider mites are not obvious due to their small size. Evidence of their presence is the appearance of yellow spots on the leaves that eventually turn brown. Control

may be achieved by applying malathion as directed on the label.

Although diseases are common to currants and gooseberries in other areas, they as yet have not been reported as major problems in Colorado.

Harvesting and Preservation

Red currants are borne in clusters and generally are deep red and soft when fully ripe. Currants should be picked by pinching off the main cluster stem at the base using the forefinger and thumb. If they are to be used for making jelly, they should be picked slightly underripe when the pectin level is high. Otherwise they may be picked when fully ripe and soft for juices, jams and tarts. Picking may be done over two or three weeks, as they remain useable for some time while on the bush. Currants may be dried and used as a substitute for raisins.

Gooseberries are unique in that they often are picked green after reaching maximum size but before ripening. Care must be taken when picking to avoid the thorns. They should be used within a few days after picking. Immature gooseberries are used in making pies, tarts, jams and meat sauces. If fruit is left to fully ripen as evidenced by a general softening and a change in color to their typical pink or red, they make an excellent fresh, sweet fruit.

Fruit yield for currants and gooseberries may be 4 to 8 quarts (4 to 8 liters) from mature plants, which are productive up to 20 years.

References

Shoemaker, T. S. *Small Fruit Culture*, 5th Edition. AVI Pub. Co. Inc., Westport, Conn. 1977.

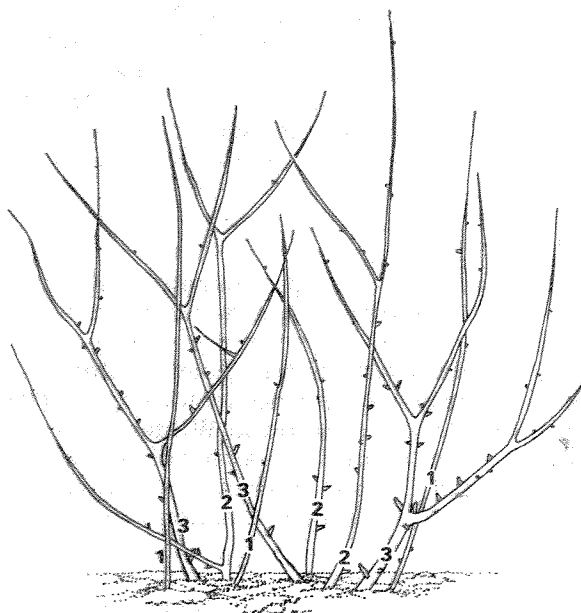


Figure 1: Currant showing correct pruning of mature shrub. Numbers 1, 2 and 3 indicate age of stem in years.