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no. 7.005

Currants, gooseberries and jostaberries for the home garden

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Quick Facts

Currants, gooseberries and jostaberries have value both as ornamentals and fruits.

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.

Jostaberry is a fast-growing hybrid between the black current and gooseberry.

Red currants (*Ribes sativum*), gooseberries (*R. grossularia*) and jostaberries (*R. nidigrolaria*) 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, gooseberries and jostaberries may be grown at elevations up to 10,000 feet.

Varieties

Red currants are preferred for fruit production over Alpine or Golden currants. Red Lake produces a dark red, mild, sub-acid berry averaging 3/8-inch. 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.

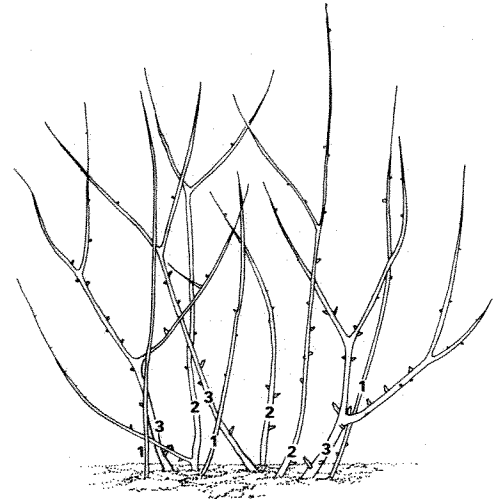


Figure 1: Currant showing correct pruning of mature shrub. Numbers 1, 2 and 3 indicate age of stem in years.

Gooseberries recommended for Colorado are Pixwell and Welcome. Pixwell produces round one-half-inch 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.

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JUN 23 1995

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Jostaberries are a complex hybrid between the gooseberry and the black current. Fruit are two to three times the size of the red current and nearly the size of the common gooseberry. They are nearly black in color, but more reddish forms are available. Best fruit set occurs when both black and red jostaberries are grown.

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

Location and Soil

Currants, gooseberries and jostaberries grow best in full sunlight. However, they tolerate partial shade. Provide a windbreak, otherwise drying winds may reduce plant growth and fruit size.

Maximum fruit production is obtained in fertile, loamy, well-drained soils with a pH six to seven. 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 plants need only a maintenance amount of fertilizer consisting of 4 pounds of ammonium sulfate and 2 pounds of treble superphosphate per 1,000 square feet. However, if the soil has not produced a good garden, it should receive 8 pounds of ammonium sulfate, 4 pounds of treble superphosphate, 1 pound of zinc sulfate, 1 pound of iron chelate and 10 bushels of organic matter per 1,000 square feet. Work these amendments in before planting.

Planting

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 bare-root plants through mail-order nurseries. Local nurseries carry them growing in containers as two- or three-year-old plants. Plant 3.5 to 4.5 feet apart in early spring, in rows spaced 6 to 8 feet apart. Prune out all damaged roots and branches of bare-root stock prior to planting. Cut branches back to 5 inches, and set plants 1 to 2 inches below the soil line. Water plants in well.

Care and Maintenance

Control weeds to minimize competition and maximize yield. These fruiting shrubs respond well to a heavy mulch of straw or similar material. When using straw, apply nitrogen at the rate of one 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, gradually reduce the amount of water applied to harden the plants prior to winter. Give a final watering in November to reduce desiccation during the winter.

Pruning

Pruning is necessary to maximize yield. Most fruit of red currants and jostaberries 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, but their one-year-old wood is more fruitful. In practice, all 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, gooseberries and jostaberries are affected with a wide range of insects and diseases. Avoid these by purchasing only quality, disease-free plants.

Insects most commonly observed are aphids, cane borers and red spider mites. Aphids are evident as small, soft-bodied, pear-shaped insects on the underside of leaves. Spray foliage, particularly the undersides, 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 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 by applying malathion as directed on the label.

Although diseases are common to currants, gooseberries and jostaberries 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. Pick currants by pinching off the main cluster stem at the base using the forefinger and thumb. If they are to be used for making jelly, pick them slightly underripe when the pectin level is high. Otherwise, pick them 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. Take care to avoid the thorns when picking. Use them 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.

Pick jostaberries when they are fully-colored (reddish-black to black) and soft. Harvest time is not critical, and fruit have a long shelf-life. They make an excellent preserves, considered by some to be better than either red current or gooseberry.

Fruit yield for currants and gooseberries may be four to eight quarts from mature plants, which are productive up to 20 years.