



Department of Horticulture

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Currants and Gooseberries

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Currants and gooseberries are hardy and easy to grow. A few plants will produce enough fruit for typical family use, and this fruit is much prized for making jellies and pies.

Currants are especially outstanding for jellies, while gooseberries are excellent for pies or preserves. Gooseberry pie is a rare delicacy seldom found outside the home.

Cultural Requirements

Currants and gooseberries prefer a cool climate and a rich, moist, but well-drained soil high in organic matter. Silt and clay loams are best; however, plants should do well on fertile sandy loams. Light, sandy soils that tend to become hot and dry during the summer, or land where water stands at any time during the year should be avoided. In general, neither crop thrives in hot, dry places. Because currants and gooseberries blossom very early in the spring, they should not be planted on low lands or in pockets where late spring frost may injure the blossoms.

The fruit of the gooseberry often scalds badly in hot weather, especially when exposed to direct sun. In southern Indiana, gooseberries thrive best when planted on a northern exposure, where they will be shaded part of the day. They also grow well on the north side of structures or in other partially shaded places. Gooseberries are subject to mildew. Therefore, they should be planted where the air circulation is good. On sloping ground, gooseberries should be planted high on the slope.

Commonly Available Currant Cultivars

Red Lake is considered the best red cultivar. The late-ripening, large, bright red fruits are borne in long-stemmed clusters, which makes picking easy. Plants are vigorous, strong, and usually more productive than other cultivars.

Wilder is a dependable, mid-season cultivar. Bushes are vigorous and productive. They yield good quality, large, bright red, attractive berries in long, compact clusters.

Black Currants are an alternate host for the disease known as white pine blister rust. Only those cultivars that are immune to the disease should be planted. Examples include **Consort**, **Crandall**, and **Crusader**.

Commonly Available Gooseberry Cultivars

There are two types of gooseberries, American and European. Fruit of the European cultivars is larger and better flavored than that of most American types. However, European plants are more subject to disease. American cultivars are likely to be healthier and more productive under Indiana growing conditions.

American Types

Pixwell is a hardy, productive cultivar with fruit that is medium sized, often borne in clusters, and pink when full ripe. The fruit hangs on long, slender stems, is of good quality, and is readily harvested. Canes are only moderately thorny.

Downing is a standard green-colored gooseberry. The plants are vigorous and highly productive. The fruit is only medium sized, with thin skin and excellent quality.

Poorman, although it bears only medium-sized fruit, is still among the largest of the American cultivars. The berries are red and good in quality, ripening about one week earlier than Downing. The plants are vigorous, productive, and less thorny than other cultivars. The fruit is very good for fresh eating when completely ripe. Poorman is suggested for home use.

European Types

Fredonia is a good late cultivar. The bushes are moderately vigorous and productive. The berries are very large, dark red, attractive, and good quality.

Preparing the Soil

Prepare the soil thoroughly before planting. Be sure quackgrass and other troublesome perennial weed plants are destroyed.

For vigorous growth the first season, turn under and thoroughly mix liberal amounts of organic matter in the form of well-rotted manure, compost, or green manure crops. Peat moss can be used in small plantings.

Planting

Plant either 1- or 2-year-old plants. Vigorous, well-rooted 1-year-old plants are best. In Indiana, fall planting (October-

November) is usually better than spring planting. Since it is difficult to prepare the soil early in the spring before the plants begin to grow. If spring planting is necessary, set the plants as early as possible.

Space plants 4-5 feet apart in each direction. Rows may be greater than 5 feet apart if required for equipment access.

Set plants as soon as you receive them from the nursery. For bare-root stock, remove all damaged or broken roots before planting, and cut the tops back to 6-10 inches above ground level, depending on the vigor of the root system.

Set bare-root plants deep enough so the lowest branch will be just below the soil surface. This is to develop a bush form. Spread the roots well, and compact the moist top soil firmly around them. Make sure no fresh manure or commercial fertilizer comes into contact with the roots.

Containerized plants may be planted throughout the growing season. Set them in the garden at the same depth as they were growing in the pot.

Weed Control

To control weed growth apply a mulch of straw, grass clippings, sawdust, or peat. A depth of 6 inches is sufficient. Add some mulch each season to maintain the proper depth. Mice may infest areas that are mulched, so apply new mulch in spring to minimize mouse populations over winter.

Fertilizing

Stable manure is the best fertilizer for currants and gooseberries. Young plantings do not need much manure. After the plants start bearing, apply 1/2 bushel of manure per bush annually.

If stable manure is not available, use green manure or mulch to maintain the humus supply. Commercial fertilizers can be substituted for manure to supply nutrients. Apply 1/4-1/3 pound of 10-10-10 or 12-12-12 per bush annually. Make application either in the fall after growth stops or in early spring before growth begins.

Where plants are set near or under trees, competition for water and nutrients is great. It is therefore important that plants receive adequate fertilizer. Growing conditions are satisfactory if growth is vigorous (new crown shoots from 15 to 20 inches long), if the plants are productive, and if the foliage is a dark, healthy green.

If you use fresh organic matter such as straw or sawdust as a mulch, double the amount of fertilizer suggested above during the year you apply the fresh mulch. If the sawdust or straw has been seasoned before you use it, fertilize the plants at the regular rate, but watch for yellowing of leaves as a sign of nitrogen deficiency.

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Pest Control

When pruning, watch for signs of cane borers (hollow stems with black centers). Infested canes may sometimes be distinguished by enlarged nodes. Cut all infested canes, and burn all prunings immediately.

Powdery mildew is often serious on gooseberries — especially European varieties. The white, powdery, web-like blotches appear on stems, leaves, and fruit, stunting plant growth. It is especially important to apply the recommended fungicide when the green tips of the buds show and again as soon as the fruit has set. Thorough spray coverage is necessary. Apply only according to label directions and at recommended rates.

Currant worms and aphids can be troublesome insect pests.

For current control recommendations consult your county Extension office.

Pruning

Prune when the plants are dormant in the late winter or very early in the spring before growth begins. The plants are bush-like, varying in height from 2-5 feet. They bear some fruit near the base of 1-year-old wood and produce the most and best fruit on spurs of 2- and 3-year-old canes.

At the end of the first season, remove all but 6 or 8 of the most vigorous shoots. At the end of the second season, leave 4 or 5 1-year shoots and 3 or 4 2-year canes. At the end of the third year, keep 3 or 4 canes each of 1-, 2-, and 3-year old wood. This will make a total of 9-12 canes on each plant.

Canes 4 years and older produce very little fruit. Pruning mature plants, therefore, should consist of thinning out the old "fruited-out" canes and the weakest of the young canes. Cut them off at ground level. Remove canes over 3 years old, and by thinning, select the proper kind and number of younger canes to maintain a productive bush. If properly pruned, a dormant bush will have 6-10 bearing canes plus 3 or 4 new ones coming along to replace the oldest each year.

Harvesting

Pick currants for jelly before fully ripe or while an occasional green berry is showing. Remove clusters carefully to avoid mashing.

Wear leather gloves to pick gooseberries because of plant thorns. For pies, jellies, and jams, pick gooseberries at their fullest size, but before they turn reddish-brown and become completely ripe. Fruits of the Poorman gooseberry are excellent for dessert at the reddish-brown ripe stage.

For more information on the subject discussed in this publication, consult your local office of the Purdue University Cooperative Extension Service.
