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# Currant & Gooseberry Planting and Care

Although currants are not well known to American gardeners, in Europe they have been prized for centuries for their beauty, flavor and nutrition. Currant and gooseberry bushes make excellent ornamentals, with their colorful spring flowers and glossy berries, and the fact that those berries have so many culinary uses is a very nice bonus!

## General Information

**Cultural Requirements:** For best fruit production, choose a site with at least one-half day sun. Unlike blueberries, which require acid soil, currants and gooseberries do well in almost any Northwest soil of average fertility and pH. They prefer medium-to-heavy, well-drained soil, but they can grow in soil that does not drain quickly enough to suit strawberries and raspberries.

**Water & Fertilizer:** The root systems of currants and gooseberries are as shallow as those of blueberries, so applying a thick layer of compost or well-rotted manure around the plant (but not touching the plant) will help keep the soil around the roots evenly moist during the summer months, and help prevent the need for weeding, which may damage the roots if not done carefully. This mulch will also add nutrients to the soil, virtually eliminating the need for additional fertilizer. Regular, deep watering during dry spells will help ensure growth and productivity.

**Spacing, Pruning & Training:** You can grow currants and gooseberries as free-standing shrubs, as a hedge, or trained in a fan-shape against a wall (this option has the added benefit of increasing air circulation through the foliage, which can minimize the risk of disease, AND it makes it easier to avoid gooseberry thorns when harvesting).

For a hedge, space gooseberries 3' apart; currants 4' apart. If you don't want a hedge, and want to maximize air circulation between your currant and gooseberry shrubs, plant them at least 6' apart. You can expect the shrubs to grow to 3-5' tall and 3-4' wide.

If you grow your currant or gooseberry plant as a free-standing shrub, when you do your annual pruning (more on this below), aim for developing an open, vase-shaped form, with equally spaced branches. It is better to thin out a branch by removing it at the base than to head it back by merely shortening it. Pruning your currant and gooseberry bushes will help keep the plants healthy and productive, and the berry size larger. A mature currant or gooseberry bush should have no more than 6-8 branches. Here are a few specific tips:

- **Black Currants:** At planting time, cut each shoot back to three buds. This allows many new shoots to form. Each winter (when the shrub is dormant) prune out any stems older than two years (older canes are often darker and peeling).
- **Red Currants & Gooseberries:** Each winter (when the shrub is dormant) prune out any stems older than two years (older canes are often darker and peeling).

**Harvesting:** Currants ripen over a two-week period. Once mature, they hold on the bushes for a week without spoiling. Gooseberries mature over a 4- to 6-week period, so you should pick individual berries when they reach their full size.

## Varieties for 2008

**Crandall Black Currant:** The most ornamental and sweetest flavor of all black currants. Delicious, clove-scented yellow flowers arrive early in spring. Leaves turn brilliant red and yellow in the late summer and fall. The fruit is large and makes a milder jam, syrup or raisin than other black currants. Grows 4-6 feet tall. Fruit ripens in mid-summer.

**Red Lake Red Currant:** Excellent for jelly, preserves and muffins, producing large dark red berries on medium to large compact clusters. Wonderful for attracting birds. Use for a native garden or as a windbreak. Grows 4-6 feet tall and 2-5 feet wide. Harvest fruit in mid-summer.

**White Imperial Currant:** Loose clusters of beautiful, white, translucent fruit with a pink blush. Size of the fruit varies from medium to large. Richest and sweetest flavor of all currants. Similar to red currants in size and hardiness. Ripens in mid-July.

**Wilder Red Currant:** Long stems of dark red medium sized berries make for easy picking. This is a vigorous and hardy cultivar with high yields. Makes excellent jelly. Ripens in July.

**Poorman Gooseberry:** Green ¾-1" berries turn pink when ripe, generally mid-June through mid-July. Sweeter than most gooseberries, which means you can eat them fresh, or cook them into pies or jams. Considered to be the best American gooseberry. Plants are vigorous and reliably productive, growing to 3-4' tall.

**Jewel Gooseberry:** A hardy Polish variety that bears heavy crops on intensely flavored, sweet, peach-colored berries. Reaches heights from 4 to 5 feet. And prefers well drained soil.

**Tayberry:** Tayberries are a cross between an Aurora Blackberry and a Scottish Red Raspberry so you will enjoy almost two distinct flavors in this single berry with the robust flavor of blackberry followed by the zing of raspberry.

**Pixwell Gooseberry:** Extremely hardy with pink to dark red/purplish fruit and very few thorns. Reaches 3-5 feet in height and width. Gooseberries rich flavor are valued for pies and preserves.

**Thornless Boysenberry:** The Boysenberry is a variety of Western trailing blackberry. Popular for high yields and wonderful scintillating flavors of sweet balanced with tart. Can be used fresh, cooked or frozen.