

Currants and Gooseberries

Keys for Success

Check with your local Cornell Cooperative Extension office to be sure that it is legal to grow *Ribes* species in your area.

Unlike most other fruits, currants and gooseberries grow well in partial shade. They prefer cool, moist locations on a north slope or the northern side of a building, for example.

Choose a site with good air circulation to avoid powdery mildew, a disease that commonly plagues *Ribes*.

Currants and gooseberries prefer rich soil with a high water-holding capacity. To prepare your site, incorporate organic matter well ahead of planting, particularly if you have light, sandy soil.

Ribes are heavy nitrogen feeders. Mulches high in nitrogen, such as grass clippings, are ideal. If you use high-carbon mulches, such as straw, you may need to apply extra nitrogen fertilizer.

Prune annually to remove four-year-old canes. Mature plants should have about eight bearing canes.

Currants and gooseberries (*Ribes* species) are hardy and easy to grow. Their sweet-tart fruits make excellent jams, pies, and jellies, and they are popular ornamental plants. Although many people today are unfamiliar with these fruits, New Yorkers grew 2,700 acres of them in the 1920s.

Choosing Cultivars

The *Ribes* are a very diverse species with hundreds of varieties that differ in plant size and form and fruit flavor, shape, texture, color, and hairiness. While most are hardy in Zone 3 or Zone 4, a few are hardy in Zone 2. Several types of interest to home gardeners include:

Red currants (*Ribes rubrum*, *R. sativum*, and *R. petraeum*). Fruits range in color from dark red to pink, yellow, white, and beige, and they continue to sweeten on the bush even after they appear to be in full color. Many people consider Rovada to be the best red currant cultivar. Plants are dependable, vigorous, late ripening, and very productive, bearing long-stemmed clusters of large red berries that are easy to pick.

White currants. A type of red currant, white currant cultivars are sold less frequently by nurseries. Blanka is most commonly available. The berries are large and mild in flavor with a pale yellow color. Most people prefer White Imperial or Primus if they are available.

Black currants (*Ribes nigrum*). Black currants are currently illegal to grow in New York, but it may soon be legal to grow cultivars that are immune to white pine blister rust (see “Legalities of Growing,” page 85).

Gooseberries. There are two types of gooseberry plants—American (*Ribes hirtellum*) and European (*Ribes uva-crispa*). Cultivars of the American type are smaller but more resistant to powdery mildew. They tend to be healthier and more productive. American cultivars include:

- **Poorman**—one of the largest of the American cultivars. Productive and vigorous, with medium-sized but high-quality fruit, it is a good cultivar for the home garden.
- **Oregon Champion**—medium to large yellow-green berries; excellent for processing.
- **Hinnonmaki Red** and **Hinnonmaki Yellow**—medium-sized red and green fruit, respectively.

- **Captivator**—a cross of American and European cultivars, it has red teardrop-shaped fruit, is nearly thornless, and is resistant to powdery mildew.
- **Pixwell**—easy to propagate, commonly sold, and very productive, but its fruit quality is poor and it is hardy only to Zone 5.

The fruits of the European cultivars are larger and better flavored. They include:

- **Invicta**—considered by some to be the best gooseberry available in North America, it is resistant to powdery mildew but susceptible to leaf spot and has very large fruit with a bland flavor.
- **Leveller** and **Careless**—the standards for British fruit production; yellow and green fruit, respectively.
- **Early Sulfur**—yellow, hairy fruit with good flavor but susceptible to powdery mildew.
- **Catherina**—large green fruit.
- **Achilles**—large red fruit.

Gooseberries are easily propagated through tip layering or stool bedding (mound layering). Sources of gooseberry and currant plants can be found at www.hort.cornell.edu/nursery.

Legalities of Growing

In the early 1900s the federal and state governments outlawed the growing of currants and gooseberries to prevent the spread of white pine blister rust (*Cronartium ribicola*). This fungal disease attacks both *Ribes* and white pines, which must live in close proximity for the blister rust fungus to complete its life cycle. Black currants (*Ribes nigrum*) and white pines (*Pinus strobus*) are extremely susceptible, and red currants and gooseberries exhibit varying degrees of susceptibility.

Although the federal ban was rescinded in 1966, some northern states, including New York, still prohibit the planting or cultivation of black currants. Some black currant types, such as the cultivars Consort, Crusader, and Titania, are hybrids that are resistant to the blister rust fungus. They can be planted in areas where other currants and gooseberries are permitted. Some towns and counties, however, restrict the planting of any *Ribes* species, so it is best to check with your local Cornell Cooperative Extension office to determine the legality of growing currants and gooseberries in your particular location.

Check with your local Cooperative Extension office to make sure it is legal to grow *Ribes* species.

Site Selection and Soil Preparation

Unlike most other fruit crops, currants and gooseberries tolerate partial shade and prefer a cool, moist growing area. Northern slopes with protection from direct sun are ideal. Planting along the side of a building or shady arbor is suitable as well. Avoid sites with poor air circulation, which increases the incidence of powdery mildew. Sloping ground alleviates this condition.

Also avoid light-textured, sandy soils. Rich, well-drained soils that have a high moisture-holding capacity are best. Incorporate organic matter (compost, peat, or manure) to improve the soil, particularly if it is somewhat sandy. The ideal soil pH is about 6.5.

Planting

Purchase strong, well-rooted plants from a reliable nursery, selecting either one- or two-year-old vigorous stock. Because currants and gooseberries begin growth very early in the spring, you should plant them in the early fall or very early in the spring, before the plants begin to grow.

Before planting, remove damaged roots and head back the tops to 6 to 10 inches. Do not allow the root systems to dry out. Set plants as soon as possible in properly prepared soil, slightly deeper than they grew in the nursery. Firm the soil around the roots.

Space plants according to the vigor of the cultivar, keeping in mind that plants are more vigorous on very fertile soil. As a general rule, plants should be spaced 3 to 5 feet apart in the row, with 8 to 10 feet between rows.

Fertilizing

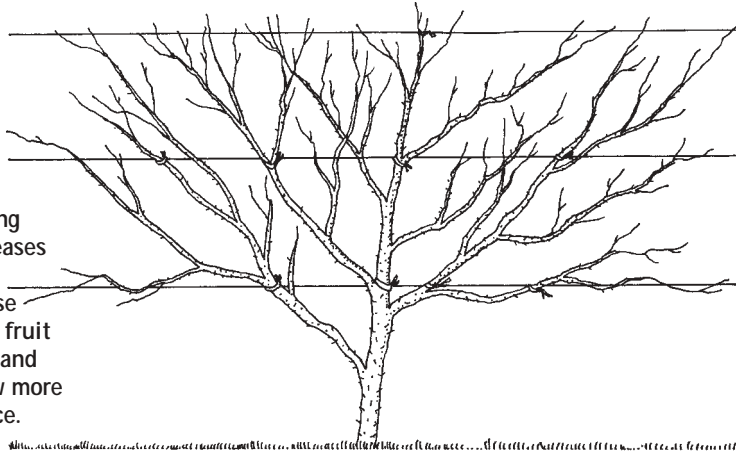
Currant and gooseberry plants are heavy feeders. To give the plants a healthy start, work manure into the soil before planting. Annual topdressings of composted manure are beneficial as well. If plants are not vigorous, lightly broadcast about 1/4 to 1/2 pound of 10-10-10 fertilizer per plant. Avoid fertilizers containing muriate of potash (potassium chloride).

Mulching

Mulch keeps the soil cool in the summer, retains moisture, and controls weeds. Spread 2 to 3 inches of mulch around plants and replenish it yearly. Suitable mulches include straw, lawn rakings, composted manure, compost, wood chips, or similar materials. Grass clippings make excellent mulch. If you use fresh straw or sawdust, you may need to apply nitrogen fertilizer because these high-carbon mulches tie up nitrogen while they decompose.

***Ribes* tolerate partial shade and prefer cool, moist conditions.**

Figure 25. Trellising gooseberries increases air circulation (decreasing disease problems), makes fruit easier to harvest, and allows you to grow more plants in less space.



Pruning

Prune currants and gooseberries when the plants are dormant in late winter or early spring. Remove any branches that lie along the ground as well as branches that are diseased or broken.

Ribes species produce fruit at the base of one-year-old wood. Fruiting is strongest on spurs of two- and three-year-old wood. After the first year of growth, remove all but six to eight of the most vigorous shoots. At the end of the second growing season, leave the four or five best one-year-old shoots and up to three or four two-year-old canes. At the end of the third year, prune so that approximately three or four canes of each age class remain.

By the fourth year, the oldest set of canes should be removed and the new canes allowed to grow. This system of renewal ensures that the plants remain productive because young canes always replace those that are removed. A strong, healthy, mature plant should have about eight bearing canes, with younger canes eventually replacing the oldest.

Diseases and Pests

Visit www.hort.cornell.edu/diagnostic for assistance in diagnosing problems with currants and gooseberries. Currant aphids, leaf spot, and powdery mildew are the most common problems that plague currant and gooseberry plantings. All disfigure or damage the leaves and can cause defoliation.

Currant aphids. These tiny, soft-bodied insects feed under young leaves toward the shoot tips, causing affected leaves to curl downward, blister, and become reddish. In severe cases, the leaves become excessively distorted and fall off, and the fruit does not ripen properly. Insecticidal soap and certain horticultural oils (check labels) can help control aphids.

Powdery mildew. This fungal disease is a problem particularly on European gooseberries. In early summer a whitish, powdery growth appears on the

Prune to maintain about eight bearing canes.

surface of leaves, shoots, and branch tips. If left unchecked, the fungus can progress to the berries themselves. Later in the summer, the growth may turn from white to brown. Warm, humid conditions and poor air circulation favor powdery mildew. Prune and dispose of infected branch and shoot tips in early spring. Some home gardeners are experimenting with trellising gooseberries because it makes disease management and harvesting easier (see Figure 25). Certain horticultural oils (check labels) applied at the first sign of powdery mildew can prevent its spread.

Anthracnose and leaf spot. Both these diseases can become serious problems, especially in wet, humid years. Symptoms range from brown spots and yellowing on leaves, young shoots, and stems to early defoliation. Destroy affected leaves, and apply mulch after leaf drop.

San Jose scale. These insects occasionally infest currant and gooseberry plants. They feed by sucking valuable plant juices, and in severe cases they affect the fruit as well. Scale insects are easily seen on the dormant wood. Prune out and destroy infested canes before new growth begins in the spring. Certain horticultural oils (check labels) can help reduce infestations.

Currant borers. These moth larvae burrow in the pith of currant and gooseberry canes. Infested canes do not die in the fall, but they put out sickly growth in the spring. The adult, a clear-winged moth, appears in June and lays eggs in leaf axils. To prevent the next generation of moths from emerging, remove and destroy infested canes before June 1. Proper pruning to remove old canes is the best control.

Currant stem girdler. This immature sawfly eats around, or girdles, the tips of new shoots, which eventually die and fall off. Cut off affected tips in May or June about 3 to 4 inches below the girdle, or if left until later in the season, about 8 inches below the girdle.

Imported currantworm and other sawflies. As soon as leaves expand in the spring, adults deposit eggs on the undersides of leaves along the major veins. A week to 10 days later, tiny larvae emerge and begin eating holes in the leaves. If numerous, they can strip a bush of its foliage in a few days. Remove leaves harboring eggs by hand.

Gooseberry fruitworm. This greenish caterpillar feeds in the fruit, causing it to color prematurely and fall off. The adult moth lays eggs on the fruit, and the larvae enter the developing berries and feed on the pulp, moving from one fruit to another. Several berries may be tied together by a silken webbing. Handpick infested berries before larvae move to adjacent ones.

Harvest

Remove any flowers so that the plants don't develop fruit during their first season of growth. Expect a light crop the second year and a full crop by the third. Currants and gooseberries ripen over a two-week period in June. Berries do not drop immediately upon ripening, so they usually can be harvested in one or two pickings. Currants can be picked in clusters, and gooseberries are picked as individual fruits. Expect mature plants to yield about 90 to 150 pounds per 100 feet of row.

Wait for the fruit to turn color before picking. Gooseberries come off easily when they are ripe. Determining the right time to pick currants requires some trial and error.