

# Growing Currants and Gooseberries

Currants and gooseberries are shrubby bush fruits that do very well in most parts of the Pacific Northwest. They are tolerant of many soil types, and thrive in sun or partial shade.

## Site Selection and Planting

While currants and gooseberries are tolerant of many soil types, they prefer well-drained organic rich soils with a pH of about 6.5-7. The best fruiting will be in full sun sites, but they will also fruit in partial shade. Space the plants 5 feet apart, and apply a layer of mulch to conserve moisture in the summer. Remove the fruit the first summer to help establish strong root systems.



## Pruning and Training

Most currants and gooseberries are grown as freestanding, multi-stemmed bushes. They can also be trained as standards (small bushes on a short trunk), or fan trained against a fence or wall. The goal in pruning gooseberries and currants is to develop an open, vase shaped bush with even spaced branches.

At planting, cut back the plants to 6"-10", choosing 3-6 healthy well-spaced branches and if necessary removing excess branches. After the first year of growth, during the dormant season, remove all but six to eight of the most vigorous shoots. At the end of the second growing season, leave the 4 or 5 best one-year-old shoots and up to 3 or 4 two-year-old canes. At the end of the third year, prune so that approximately 3 or 4 canes of each age class should 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.

## Harvest

Currants and gooseberries tend to ripen their fruit over a 2-3 week period in mid-summer. Some trial and error is needed for each cultivar to determine peak ripeness. Gooseberries easily come off the plant when fully ripe. Currants may need taste testing to determine ripeness. Currants often are borne in clusters or 'strings'. If the fruit is to be processed, the entire string can be harvested and cooked with the fruit during processing.

## Fertilizing

Currants and gooseberries are fairly heavy feeders. Use a good woody plant or fruit tree fertilizer. They prefer a soil pH of 6.5, so liming the soil at planting and annually in the fall is recommended. Keep the plants mulched to conserve soil moisture.

## Disease and Insect Problems

There are three main insect pests that trouble gooseberries and currants in the Pacific Northwest climate.

### *Pests*

- The most common pest is the imported currant worm which is a sawfly larva. The larvae can defoliate a bush in a matter of days. The ½" long larvae are small, black spotted green worms with black heads. Using a foliar insecticide when they first appear can control their populations. Handpicking small populations is also a good control. Floating row covers can also prevent the flies from reaching the foliage.
- The gooseberry maggot, also known as currant fruit fly can make the fruit unusable. The adult fly emerges from the soil in April, and lays eggs on the forming fruit. The resulting maggots feed within the berries.
  - Applying foliar insecticides such as Neem oil extracts or Spinosad when the adult flies are first noted is one control.
  - Covering the bushes with floating row covers keeps the flies from reaching the fruit. Placing tarps on the ground around the bushes prevents the larvae from entering the soil to pupate.
- Aphids feed on the undersides of the leaves, causing them to crinkle, and often leads to a blistered look to the foliage. Control by washing off with strong jets of water, or spraying insecticidal soap.



*Imported Currant Worm*

### *Diseases*

Diseases are uncommon but possible. Choosing your planting site carefully helps prevent the bushes from being stressed and subject to problems.

- One of the main diseases of currants and gooseberries is powdery mildew. Make sure your planting site has good air circulation. Keep the bushes pruned to encourage air circulation. The best control is to plant resistant varieties.
- All *Ribes* are potentially alternate hosts for white pine blister rust. Currants and gooseberries should not be planted where 5-needled pines are planted unless those cultivars are resistant or immune to rust.



*Blister Rust on Ribes*