

GROWING CURRANTS & GOOSEBERRIES IN MONTANA

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INTRODUCTION

Currants and gooseberries are extremely hardy fruits which can be grown almost anywhere in Montana. Both of these fruits have been known for centuries and, in fact, many cultivars that are popular today are extremely old.

Both currants and gooseberries are attractive deciduous shrubs which may be used to attract birds and make preserves, jellies and pies. Three or four currant and gooseberry plants usually produce enough fruit for the average family. A properly maintained planting should continue to produce for 10 or more years.

Currants and gooseberries are extremely cold hardy. They grow best where summer temperatures are cool, and moisture is plentiful. They will grow in nearly any location, but are better adapted to rich, well-drained clay loam soils. Avoid planting them on light, sandy soils which tend to become hot and dry during the summer, or on heavy clay soils where water stands for long periods of time. The plants will bloom earlier in the spring than many other small fruits. Therefore, planting on a north-facing slope where flowering is delayed later in the spring may be preferable in some areas.

Gooseberries have an arching growth habit, reaching a height of 4-5 ft when mature. The stems are thorny, and berries occur singly along the canes. Fruits are usually picked at the firm green stage, when they are too tart to eat fresh, and made into pies or preserves. Fruits may be pink or green when ripe.

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Currants are more upright than gooseberries and are thornless. Unlike gooseberries, currants will send up shoots away from the main crown and may need to be cultivated if they are to be kept from spreading. Currant fruits are blander in flavor than gooseberries and borne in clusters on the canes. When ripe, currants may be black, red, or white (yellow).

Gooseberries and currants will develop larger fruit when there is good pollination and seed development. Most cultivars are self-fertile, but, as with many other fruits, higher yields and larger fruit size are usually achieved with cross-pollination. Therefore, it is generally desirable to plant more than one cultivar.

PLANTING

Currants and gooseberries should be planted in early spring. One-year-old plants, if vigorous, generally transplant and establish best. Plants should be spaced 4-5 feet apart in rows 7-9 feet apart. Mix 1 bushel of compost or well-rotted manure with the soil in the planting hole. Quackgrass or other perennial weeds should be controlled before planting.

When planting, set the plants about an inch deeper than they were in the nursery. This induces new shoots to form below the soil level so that a bush is formed rather than a single stem. Firm the soil around the plants and water the plants thoroughly. Prune to four or five canes to about one-third of their original length.

CULTURE

Weeds should be controlled to reduce competition with the plants. Control weeds with hoeing or shallow cultivation. Avoid deep cultivation which may injure the roots. A straw or hay mulch may be used to control weeds and conserve moisture. The mulch should be about 6 inches deep, or deep enough to smother weeds. Additional mulching material should be applied each year to maintain the proper depth. Rodent control in winter is essential if mulches are used.

Fertilize the plants annually during the spring. Eight ounces per plant of a complete fertilizer such as 1—10-10 is usually adequate. The fertilizer should be spread and worked into a 12" circular area around each plant. Additional nitrogen fertilizer should be added if a hay mulch is used.

Fruit of gooseberries and currants are borne laterally on 1-year-old shoots or on short 1-year branches on 2- and 3-year wood. Wood older than 3 years produces inferior fruit and should be removed during pruning. Pruning should be done as a renewal process, in which stems older than 3 years are removed at the base of the plant and stems produced the previous year are reduced in number. Remove all but 3 or 4 1-year stems, dead or diseased wood, and branches produced too close to the ground. The remaining 1-year branches may be headed or reduced in length to promote fruit bud formation. A well-pruned vigorous plant should have 10-12 canes, with about 3 or 4 in each of the 1-, 2-, and 3-year age groups. Pruning should always be done in the spring before growth starts.

PESTS

Pests are usually controlled by clean cultivation, pruning, and if necessary, spraying.

The white pine blister rust fungus can spend part of its life cycle on both gooseberries and currants. The black currant is much more susceptible to the disease than the other *Ribes* species. A law was passed in 1926 prohibiting the possession, propagation, and sale of black currants or cultivars, and forbidding the shipment of plants into Montana. Federal laws also restrict the introduction of *Ribes* species from other countries. It is important to check with the USDA Plant Protection and Quarantine Division before importing these species.

Leaf spot diseases may be common. The spots are small and circular with gray centers. Leaves later turn yellow and drop. These diseases may result in premature defoliation of the bushes. Pruning and removal of infected leaves is usually adequate to control leaf spot diseases.

Powdery mildew may infect the leaves with a white, moldy growth that results in abnormal leaves and stem tips. A contact fungicide may be used to control this disease.

Currant caterpillars may feed on the leaves and defoliate the plant. This insect pest is usually controlled by spraying with an all-purpose insecticide.

Currant aphids suck the juice from the undersurface of leaves and cause reddish discoloration and crinkling of leaves. An application of malathion when the leaves are one-half inch long will usually control this pest. ALWAYS READ THE LABEL AND FOLLOW IT CAREFULLY WHEN USING ANY PESTICIDE!

HARVESTING

Gooseberries are often stripped from the branches with a glove-covered hand if they are to be processed immediately. Harvest more carefully to avoid puncturing the fruit on the thorns if the fruit is to be stored for any length of time. Gooseberries for jelly may be picked when they are slightly immature. Flats of picked gooseberry fruit should be stored in the shade since they sunburn easily. Currants may be picked singly or in clusters.

PROPAGATION

Currants and gooseberries may be propagated by hardwood cuttings or by layering. Currants are usually propagated by cuttings taken during the dormant season. Use 1-year wood which is healthy and of medium vigor and make cuttings about 8" long. Some gooseberry cultivars will also propagate from hardwood cuttings, but layering may be more successful. Branches may be bent down in the fall or spring, held down with pegs and covered with soil. After one or two seasons, the layers should be rooted and may be removed from the parent plant. Mound layering may be used if larger numbers of plants are desired. To do this, cut the parent plant back to near the ground during the dormant

season. After shoots are produced in midsummer, mound dirt up around the base of the plant so that half of the shoot is covered. Roots will be produced on the portion of the shoot which is covered with soil. Shoots should be removed after they are well-rooted.

CULTIVARS

Many currant and gooseberry cultivars have been in cultivation for numerous years. Newer cultivars have been developed which have improved berry size, disease resistance, and in the case of gooseberries, fewer spines. Always select cultivars that are recommended for your area by a reputable nursery.

Currants

'Red Lake' is the leading currant cultivar in North America. It originated at the University of Minnesota Horticultural Research Center near Excelsior. Clusters are above medium size and compact. Berries are very large and red, with a pleasant mild flavor and good quality. 'Red Lake' is an early to midseason cultivar. Bushes are nearly erect, moderately vigorous, and very productive. This cultivar has produced well in experimental plots at the Montana Agricultural Experiment Station at Bozeman.

'Stephens No. 9' has large, medium-red fruit of good quality. It originated in Ontario, Canada. This cultivar has medium to large-sized clusters and is of moderate vigor. Plants are spreading and productive.

'Wilder' is an old variety which was developed in Indiana. Fruits are large, dark-red, tart in flavor and are borne on long stems. Plants are vigorous, spreading, hardy and productive. 'Wilder' is moderately resistant to leaf spot.

'White Grape' is another old cultivar which is still widely grown. Fruits are green-white. 'White Imperial' is a newer cultivar which is similar to 'White Grape' but considered by many to be superior.

'Minnesota 71' is a large, red-fruited cultivar of good quality, with large clusters. Plants are vigorous, spreading and productive.

'Perfection' is an old cultivar with upright growth. Plants are vigorous and productive. Berries are red, of medium size, and borne in loose clusters.

Gooseberries

'Poorman' is a red-fruited, gooseberry cultivar which has spiny, spreading growth. Fruit are large and of good quality, and plants are vigorous and productive.

'Pixwell' originated in North Dakota. Berries are of medium size, light red when ripe, and of good quality. Long stems make picking easy. Bushes are moderately vigorous and were very productive at Bozeman.

'Fredonia' has large, dark red fruit of good quality on moderately vigorous, open-growing plants. Maturity is relatively late.

'Welcome' originated at the University of Minnesota Horticultural Research Center. Berries are medium large and of good quality, ripening very early. The flavor is mildly tart. Color is light, but dull red. Bushes are vigorous and medium upright. Spines are sparse, very short, weakly attached, and usually missing from older wood. This cultivar yielded well in trials at Bozeman.

'Red Jacket' is nearly thornless, with large, dull red berries. Plants are vigorous.

Other cultivars with reduced thorniness include 'Abundance', 'Spine-free' and 'Captivator.'

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