Gooseberry and Currant Culture

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Gooseberries and currants are two of the hardier small fruit crops, and they will withstand almost any low temperatures in Oregon. Gooseberries withstand slightly higher temperatures than currants, as a rule.

Both of these plants are alternate hosts to the white pine blister rust, a serious disease of the five-needle pines. For this reason, they should not be planted within 1,500 feet of white pine trees. The European black currant (Ribes nigrum L.) is the greatest menace to white pines, since it is the nurse plant of the blister rust disease. Rust is known to have spread from this plant to pines over 200 miles away. For this reason, we have a program of eradication of all black currants in Oregon.

The acreage of gooseberries and red currants in Oregon fluctuates (500 to 1,000 acres), depending mainly on the market. Usually, three or four times as much acreage is devoted to gooseberries as to currants.

The culture of these two crops is much the same.

Soil and site

Currants and gooseberries grow best on the heavier, well-drained soils. A cool, fertile soil is needed for the best growth.

Gooseberries are quite susceptible to mildew on both foliage and fruit. They should be planted in an area with good air drainage to help avoid this problem. Currants and gooseberries both bloom quite early, so frosty areas should be avoided.

Soil for these small fruit crops should have deep and thorough preparation, as for a garden. If the land has been in sod, allow time for the rotting of the grass roots so there will be no interference at the time of planting.

Propagation of plants

Plants of recommended varieties can usually be obtained from reliable nurserymen within the state. If a grower wishes to propagate plants, he can do so quite easily.

Gooseberries are usually propagated by use of the mound layer system. The stock plants are cut back near the ground before growth starts in the spring. By July, a nice crop of shoots will have grown and they can be covered halfway to the tips with soil. By early fall, most of these shoots will have rooted and can be removed and set in nursery rows to grow one or two years longer. Any shoots not well rooted at digging time should be left in place to grow for another year. They can then be removed to the nursery for another year of growth before they are planted in the field. European varieties are usually propagated by this method.

Some gooseberries propagate best by use of cuttings. The current season's growth, about 8 inches, is used for cuttings; these are handled similar to currant cuttings. Currants are propagated almost entirely by use of cuttings from the new growth.

Cuttings of from 8 to 12 inches are made as soon as the leaves have dropped in the early fall. They are handled by one of several methods. They can be set in the nursery row at once, buried in sand with the bottom end up, or stored in a cool, slightly moist cellar until spring. As early as soil can be worked, the cuttings are set 3 to 6 inches apart in the nursery row. Pack the soil firmly around the cuttings.

Usually two buds are left exposed above the soil level, In from one to two years, the plants will be suitable for field setting.

Handling planting stock

Planting of gooseberries and currants is usually done in the early spring as soon as the soil can be worked. In a mild climate, the plants can be set in the fall.

When the plants arrive from the nursery, they should be opened at once. If planting cannot be done at once, the plants should be healed in separately but close together. If the roots are dry, they should be soaked for several hours before planting or healing in.

Planting

Both currants and gooseberries start growth very early in the spring. Because of this early growth, fall planting is practiced in the milder areas if stock can be obtained. A good time to plant is in early October or in the early spring when the soil can be worked satisfactorily.

The rows are spaced according to the type of equipment that is to be used for cultivation. The spacing will usually vary from 6 to 8 feet. Plants are spaced from 4 to 6 feet apart in the row, depending on the variety used and the fertility of the soil.

Before planting, remove all broken roots and cut the tops back to about 6 inches above the ground. Set the plants so the lowest branches start just below the surface of the soil. Pack the soil firmly about the roots with your foot, as the plants are set.

If the soil is easily worked, the hole for planting can be made by forcing a spade straight down and then pressing it forward. The roots are placed in the hole, the spade withdrawn, and the soil firmed about the roots. In heavy soils, the hole will have to be dug and planting will be much slower.
Cultivation
Both currants and gooseberries are shallow-rooted, so cultivation must be watched to prevent damage to the roots. In an attempt to force a deeper rooting of the plants, first-year cultivations (especially early ones) should be deeper than normal.

Weeds are now being controlled very well with chemicals. Use of the chemicals changes from year to year, so it is best to check with your local Extension agent for latest recommendations.

Intercropping
Currants and gooseberries are frequently interplanted in orchards. One or two rows can usually be grown between the trees for a few years without interfering with the tree culture.

When these berry crops are grown as a field planting, they can often be intercropped the first two years with an early vegetable crop such as potatoes or cabbage.

Maintaining fertility
Both the currant and the gooseberry respond readily to fertilizers. The condition of the soil and the plant food present will regulate the amount and kind of fertilizer to be used. Many growers use 10 to 20 tons of stable manure, where it is available, while others use only complete chemical fertilizers such as 10-20-20 or 10-16-8.

Green manure is applied or cover crops are planted in the early fall between the rows. Rye, oats, and barley are frequently used. These are worked into the soil the following spring and help to maintain the supply of organic matter and fertility. They also prevent soil erosion on rolling fields during the winter months.

Pruning
Red and white currants should have all weak shoots removed at the end of the first year, with about six or eight strong shoots left to form the plant. At the end of the second year, leave four or five of the two-year-old shoots and three or four one-year-old shoots. At the end of the third year, leave about three shoots for each year's growth.

Fruit is borne at the base of one-year-old wood and on spurs of the older wood. The two- or three-year-old wood produces best. After three years, pruning is a case of removal of older canes and replacement with new shoots.

Varieties that tend to spread and droop should have outer growth removed to keep the fruit off the ground. Varieties that grow more upright are thinned to give the fruit more room to develop.

In general, gooseberries are pruned much the same as currants. Fruits are produced on one-year-old wood and one-year-old spurs, with the three-year-old canes being the most productive.

Duration of planting
The life of any planting is quite dependent on the care it receives and upon the soil and location. Eight to ten years might be considered a short life, and many plantings do well for twenty or more years if given good care.

Harvesting the crop
Currants and gooseberries can be left on the bushes for several weeks, but the berry becomes less tart as it ripens. For many purposes, the berries are picked prior to maturity to take advantage of this tart flavor.

Picking berries for the fresh market must be done carefully in order to avoid crushing the currants and bruising or scratching the gooseberries. Currants are picked by grasping the stems above the berry cluster. Gooseberries are picked separately or by stripping them off by hand or with a scoop. Gloves are worn for gooseberry harvesting. When gooseberries are stripped off, they will be mixed with leaves which can be removed by use of some type of a wind blast.

Both of these crops will produce from three to five tons per acre as an average.

Varieties

**Currants**
- **Fay**—Large, dark red, acid, early to midseason, canes easily broken
- **Perfection**—Large, crimson, subacid, midseason, compact clusters, best for northwest
- **White Imperial**—Large, pale yellow, sweet, loose medium-sized clusters, best dessert variety
- **Red Lake**—Large, light red, subacid, late, long clusters, very hardy
- **Victoria**—Medium size, bright red, subacid, long loose clusters, hardy
- **Wilder**—Large, dark red, subacid, midseason, large compact cluster, hardy

**Gooseberries**
- **Downing**—Large, pale green, productive, widely grown
- **Glendale**—Medium size, dull red, productive, vigorous
- **Oregon Champion**—Large, green, late, productive, best northwest variety
- **Poorman**—Large, brilliant red, vigorous, productive, fewer short thorns

Spray program
These two crops are bothered by a few insects and diseases for which there are good control programs. Aphids, fruit worms, mildew, and rust are the most common pests.

Since the materials and concentrations for control of these pests change frequently, it is best that growers check with their local Extension office for the latest information on pest control.

Use pesticides safely
Use only recommended pesticides, at approved rates. Observe the time limitations on use of pesticides to avoid illegal residues at harvest.

Avoid exposure to hazardous chemicals by wearing an approved mask, gloves, and water-repellent clothing. Store pesticides out of reach of children.

Dispose of empty pesticide containers immediately by burning or burying deeply in a remote area.