



## FARMING KNOW-HOW

### Guidelines to Better Family Farming

# Growing Currants & Gooseberries

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CURRANTS AND GOOSEBERRIES are very hardy. They withstand winter cold and can be grown successfully in almost all parts of Michigan where suitable soils are found. They are especially well suited to the home fruit garden.

The plants are easy to grow, and enough fruit for family use can be produced in a small space. They bear some fruit the second and third years and a full crop the fourth year after planting. Three or four currant and gooseberry plants will produce plenty of fruit for an average family.

Currants are highly prized for making jellies and for other culinary uses. In many areas, there is enough demand for them to justify small commercial plantings.

Gooseberries are not as popular as currants and there is only a limited demand for the fresh fruit. Commercial canneries are the usual outlet for this crop.

## Varieties of Currants

### Red Currants

*Red Lake* is considered the best red variety. The late-ripening, large, bright red fruit is borne on long-stemmed clusters which make it easy to pick. *Wilder* is a dependable midseason variety. *Cascade* is an excellent early variety; the fruit is larger and milder in flavor than that of *Red Lake* and it ripens a week earlier.

*Prince Albert* is one of the latest maturing red varieties and is useful for extending the harvesting season. The berries are small-to-medium and very acid. *Viking* is a valuable variety because of its resistance to white pine blister rust. Planting of this variety in control areas may be allowed even though other varieties are barred.

### White Currants

*White Grape* is the most common white variety. The berries are large, pale yellow, and very mild in flavor.

### Black Currants

The common cultivated black currant is the principal host for the blistering rust fungus, a serious disease of white pine trees. For that reason, it has been declared a public nuisance. The planting, possession, or sale of these plants in Michigan is not allowed.

## Varieties of Gooseberries

Two types of gooseberries — the American and the European — are grown. The fruit of the European varieties is larger and better flavored than most of the American types. The European plants are subject to disease, though, which limits their use. The plants of the American varieties are healthier and more productive and are likely to do better under average conditions.

### American Varieties

*Downing* is the most important American variety. Its medium-to-small, pale green fruit is generally preferred for commercial canning.

*Houghton* is a very productive variety. However, its small, dark red fruit is not liked as well for canning as the *Downing*. It is also very susceptible to aphids.

*Poorman* bears fruit of only medium size, but it is still among the largest of the American varieties. The berries are red and are good in quality. The plants are vigorous, productive, and less thorny than most other varieties. It is recommended for home and market use.

## European Varieties

*Chautauqua* and *Industry* are the most common varieties of the European type. Since they are not commonly reproduced by nurserymen, you may find that it is hard to get plants. The fruit of *Chautauqua* is very large and is light green in color. That of *Industry* is very large, dark red, and somewhat hairy.

*Fredonia* is a good late variety of the European type. The fruit is large, dark red, and good in quality; the plants are vigorous and productive. This variety is especially recommended for the home garden.

## Where to Plant

Currants and gooseberries need cool, moist growing conditions. The plants do not thrive in hot, dry places. Often the fruit of the gooseberry scalds badly in hot weather, especially when exposed to the direct rays of the sun. Gooseberries thrive best on northern or northeastern slopes or exposures where it is usually cool and moist, and protected from the sun. In your home garden, select the north or east side of a building, fence, or arbor, or other partially shaded places.

Gooseberries are more subject to mildew than are currants. Plant them where the air circulation is good. On sloping ground, plant currants on the lower part of the slope and gooseberries above.

Because currants and gooseberries blossom very early in the spring, do not plant them on low-lying lands or in pockets where late spring frosts may injure the blossoms.

## The Soil

### Type of Soil

Currants and gooseberries require a soil that is cool, moist, well drained, and high in organic matter. The heavier soil types such as silt and clay loams are best. The plants also do well on fertile sandy loams. Avoid planting on light sandy soils which tend to become hot and dry during the summer or on land where water stands at any time of the year.

### Soil Preparation

Have the soil well prepared before planting. For best results, plow the land in the fall and refit it before planting the following spring.

Be sure that quackgrass and other troublesome perennial weed plants are completely wiped out (see Extension Bulletin E-433, *Weed Control Guide for Vegetable and Fruit Crops* — 1977).

For vigorous growth the first season, apply well-

rotted manure in the fall or early in the spring. Thoroughly mix it with the soil. If manure is not available, increase the organic content of the soil by turning under soil-improving crops. Granulated peat will help in the home garden.

## Planting Restrictions

Blister rust, a serious disease of white pine trees, can also survive on currants and gooseberries. To prevent the spread of the disease, certain areas of Michigan, including all of the Upper Peninsula and the northwest portion of the Lower Peninsula, have been set aside as blister rust control areas.

Before buying currants or gooseberries for planting in these areas, apply to the Bureau of Plant Industry, State Department of Agriculture, Lansing, Michigan, for a control area permit. These permits are free.

No permit is required for planting currants and gooseberries in the counties south and east of the shaded area shown on the map (page 4). Remember, though, you cannot grow common cultivated black currants in Michigan.

No currants or gooseberries should be planted within 900 feet of white pine trees or within 1500 feet of any nursery where white pine seedlings are sown.

## Source of Plants

Usually, it is best to buy your plants from reliable nurserymen. The plants are easily propagated, or reproduced, by means of layers and cuttings. It is illegal to move propagating stock from one property to another without having it inspected.

Currants are usually propagated by means of hardwood cuttings, 8 to 10 inches long, made from well-matured shoots of one season's growth. Collect them in late fall or early winter and store them in moist sand, sawdust, or peat moss in a cool place where they will remain dormant until early spring. Then, plant them about 6 inches apart in nursery rows and let them grow for one or two years before planting in the field. When planting the cuttings, cover all but the two upper buds with soil.

Gooseberries are propagated most easily by mound layering. They can also be propagated by means of hardwood cuttings.

For mound layering, cut back the plant from which the layers are to be taken nearly to the ground before growth starts in the spring. By July a large number of vigorous new shoots will have been produced. Mound these with soil about halfway to the tips — be careful to work the soil down among the shoots. The covered part of the shoots usually becomes rooted by fall. Cut the shoot from the parent plant the following

spring and plant immediately, or grow in nursery rows for one or two years before moving to the field.

## Directions for Planting

Use either one- or two-year-old plants for planting. Vigorous, well-rooted one-year-old plants are best.

Set plants either in fall or spring. Fall planting is best. Do it as soon as possible after the plants have become dormant (about September 15). Do spring planting very early, before the plants start to grow.

Space the plants 4 to 5 feet apart in rows 8 to 11 feet apart according to the vigor of the variety, soil fertility, and the type of cultivator you will use.

Set the plants as soon as you receive them from the nursery. Before planting, remove all damaged parts of broken roots and cut the top back to stand 6 to 10 inches above ground, depending on the vigor of the root system.

Set the plant deep enough so that the lowest branch will start just below the surface of the soil. This is necessary to develop a bush form. Single-stem plants (tree form) are not recommended. Pack the soil firmly around the roots.

## Cultivation

Begin cultivating soon after the plants have been set; repeat often enough to prevent weed growth. You can work the soil quite deeply the first year. Later cultivation should be shallow to avoid harming the roots. Continue cultivation until after harvest, if necessary, then seed a cover crop of oats or some other suitable annual soil-improving crop between the rows. Work this into the soil the following spring.

## Mulching

In the home garden or in other areas where cultivation is not convenient or advisable, use a mulch of straw, strawy manure, lawn rakings, or similar materials. Hardwood sawdust and granulated peat are also suitable.

The mulch should be deep enough to smother grass and weeds (about 6 inches). Add some mulching material each season to maintain the proper depth. Mice are likely to infest plants that are mulched. If mice are present, place a small quantity of poison grain bait near each plant before winter sets in.

## Fertilizers

Manure is the best fertilizer for currants and gooseberries. Young plants do not need much manure. After the plants start bearing, apply annual

dressings of manure to keep them productive.

If enough manure is not available, use green manure or cover crops to maintain the humus supply.

Commercial fertilizers sometimes help the crop. If the soil is low in fertility and the plants lack vigor, apply enough mixed fertilizer of about 1-1-1 ratio to give 25 to 30 pounds of actual nitrogen per acre. (Your fertilizer dealer can help you figure this amount.) Add this fertilizer either in the fall after growth stops or in early spring before growth starts.

If you use fresh straw or sawdust alone as a mulch, double the amount of fertilizer recommended above during the year you apply the fresh mulch. If the straw or sawdust has seasoned outside before you use it for mulch, fertilize the fruit at the regular rate.

## Pruning

Prune any time the plants are dormant. The best time for this work is usually in the late winter or very early spring before growth starts. With young plants, pruning means thinning new growth to control the number of main canes that will develop.

At the end of the first season, remove all but six or eight of the most vigorous shoots. At the end of the second season, leave four or five one-year shoots and three or four two-year canes. At the end of the third year, keep three or four canes each of one-, two-, and three-year-old wood. This will make a total of 9 to 12 canes on each plant.

To prune older bearing plants, remove the oldest stems each year and thin out the new shoots. Leave just enough of the most vigorous shoots to replace the older canes which you remove. A good bearing bush should have from 6 to 10 bearing canes, plus 3 or 4 new ones coming along to replace the oldest each year. Remove all branches that tend to lie on the ground, and keep the centers of the bushes open by removing crowding and interfering branches. Do not make the common mistake of leaving the bushes too thick.

## Insect and Disease Control

When pruning, watch for signs of cane borers (hollow stems with black centers). If you find these signs, cut the stem back to fresh green pith. Burn all prunings immediately.

Several other diseases and insects affect currants and gooseberries. Their control is most important for good production. Spray materials and suggestions for their use change from year to year. Consult the latest edition of the Fruit Pesticide Handbook (Extension Bulletin E-154) for up-to-date pest control practices. This Handbook can be purchased from your local Cooperative Extension Service office.

