

Welsh Fruit Stocks Gooseberry Growing Guide



Gooseberry bushes are of the genus *Ribes*. They produce large round berries that are green on culinary varieties, or red on dessert varieties. The older branches on the bush are tough and woody, whereas younger growth is tender and green. They can be spiny or almost spine free. Gooseberry bushes will grow sporadically if left alone, so pruning is highly recommended (see below).

We take cuttings from our own PHPS certified (Approved Health grade) mother stock in early spring and plant them out in our fields. We look after them through the summer while they are growing, and then lift and despatch them as one-year-old bushes from November until March/April (depending on the season).

Planting

Location and Soil

Gooseberry bushes make a hardy soft fruit bush, capable of surviving in lower temperatures, windier conditions, and more shady conditions than many of the other soft fruit bushes and canes. Although gooseberry bushes do not necessarily need a very fertile soil, the ideal soil should be medium weight, well drained, loamy and moist. They are fairly tolerant of most soils, including those more alkaline. The site should be chosen carefully, as a gooseberry bush can survive for a good few years.

Preparation

The soil should be prepared in the late summer, by mixing in some organic matter. If you prefer, dig a hole about 3' (1m) across, mix in some organic matter, and then refill it. The bushes should be planted 4-5' (1.2-1.5m) apart.

Planting Method

Dig a hole big enough to accept the roots without bunching or curling, and ensure that the hole is deep enough to ensure the roots are covered. Firm in well to ensure that there is no air around the roots.

Fruiting and Cropping

Pruning and Care

Gooseberry bushes fruit on the spurs of both the young and the old wood. We recommend creating an upright bush (or a one or two-shooted cordon) by cutting away lower branches to create a clear leg. Initially after planting the remaining branches can be trimmed to half of their length, or to leave three to four buds on each branch. Try to make the last bud on the branch an outward-facing one.

Each winter trim the new (greener, less woody) shoots produced during the year to half of their growth, leaving any side shoots at about 2" (5cm) in length. This can also be repeated in the summer if growth is vigorous, leaving four to five leaves on each side shoot.

To create a fuller bush another option is to prune the older branches from the centre of the bush back to about 1" (2cm) in length, leaving the newer shoots around the outside of the bush.

Pollination

Gooseberry bushes are self-pollinating, so only one bush is needed. Ensure insects can access your bushes at flowering time to aid pollination.

Fruit Protection

As always, birds can be partial to gooseberries. There are various methods to help prevent this, like netting and bird scarers, or you may want to invest in a fruit cage.

Pests and Disease

Gooseberry bushes have quite good disease resistance, with the most common problem being gooseberry sawfly caterpillars, which will eat their way through the leaves very quickly. At first sight pinch off the caterpillars, but if they are severe an organic insecticidal spray should prevent total defoliation. American Gooseberry Mildew has traditionally been a problem, but we choose to grow varieties that are more resistant to this, so they should cause less difficulties.

Feeding and Watering

Keep the gooseberry bushes well watered during dry weather, especially while the fruit is forming. A layer of organic matter can be applied as a mulch during the spring, although take care not to mulch right up to the base of the bush. Some high potash fertiliser could be a good addition to the soil at the end of the summer.