

GROW YOUR OWN: GOOSEBERRY



Gooseberry plants are delicious fruit that can be easily grown in containers or on the ground, and once established, they produce an abundant crop every summer for up to 10 to 15 years. This guide covers everything from selecting the right variety of gooseberry to planting and caring for the plants. It includes tips on how to protect the fruit from birds, the best time to plant, watering, feeding, and pruning techniques. Whether you're an experienced gardener or just starting out, this guide will help you grow your own delicious gooseberries.



GETTING STARTED

Rarely sold in supermarkets, gooseberry plants are an overlooked yet delicious fruit plant that is well worth growing. Once they are established, gooseberries typically crop abundantly every summer for up to 10 to 15 years. For sweet tangy berries, dessert varieties should be chosen, but culinary varieties are ideal for creating pies, jams and sauces.

Happy in sun or light shade, gooseberries are easy to look after growing in the ground and in containers. They can even be grown in bushes up to 1-1.5m tall and wide.

They can also be grown as standards, shaped like a lollipop, with a bushy head on top of a tall stem. These are usually purchased as ready-trained standard varieties that have been grafted to form attractive trees that are great for saving space.

Pruned twice a year, gooseberries are easy to keep in good shape. To protect the fruit from birds, netting should be placed over plants as soon as the berries start to ripen.

| | Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | Jun | Jul | Aug | Sep | Oct | Nov | Dec |
|---------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Plant | ● | ● | ● | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ● | ● | ● |
| Harvest | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ● | ● | ● | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |

CHOOSING GOOSEBERRIES

There are numerous varieties to choose from, with attractive grape-like red, green or yellow fruits that ripen from June to early August, depending on the variety. Dessert varieties are sweet and often enjoyed eaten raw, whilst culinary varieties are best cooked into puddings, jams and pies.

Varieties vary slightly in terms of size and vigour, ranging from 1m up to 1.5m tall and wide. Some varieties are also less susceptible to mildew or have almost thornless stems to make pruning and harvesting easier.

When choosing your variety of gooseberry, look for those with an RHS Award of Garden Merit (AGM). This symbolises their ability to perform well in the trials performed by the Royal Horticultural Society.

PLANTING GOOSEBERRIES

Gooseberries are hardy, robust plants that can be grown in many different places. They are able to cope with most soil conditions but prefer moist, well-drained ground.

For the best crop and sweeter fruits, grow in a sunny position. It is best to choose a sheltered location. This is because the stems are brittle and can snap in windy conditions, especially when laden with fruits.

Avoid areas prone to late frosts, as these can damage the early flowers and reduce fruiting. Consider building a fruit cage enclosure to shield the buds and fruit from birds.



PLANTING IN THE GROUND

You can plant bare-root gooseberries from late autumn to early spring, and container-grown plants at any time. Although avoid planting when the ground is waterlogged, parched or frozen. Late autumn is the ideal planting time as it gives the gooseberry plants time to settle in before the new growing season begins in spring.

Gooseberries are easy to plant following our step-by-step guide below:

1. Give your plant a good watering, so the root ball is completely soaked.
2. Create a hole three times as wide as the root ball and the same depth. Hard, compacted soil should be forked to loosen it, to help the roots spread.
3. To improve the soil, add some organic matter to the soil that has been removed if it is very sandy or has a lot of clay.
4. Check the root ball, if the roots are very congested, tease out a few. This will help them explore and grow into the soil quicker.
5. Place your plant so the first flare of roots sits just below the surface of the soil and you don't bury and stems.
6. Refill the hole using the soil removed previously, compacting around the plant.
7. Water in well, and add a layer of mulch around the plant, leaving a mulch-free collar around the base of the stems.

Allow the following spacing if planting multiple plants:

- Bushes and standards: 1.2 – 1.5m apart
- Cordons: 30 – 38cm apart
- Fans: 1 – 1.5m apart

Planting in containers

Choose a pot that is at least 40cm wide and deep, with plenty of drainage holes in the base. Fill the pot with fresh soil-based compost. Gooseberries that are grown in containers can be planted at any time of the year, but late autumn is the best time to plant bare-root varieties.

Plant at the same depth it was previously growing – keeping the top of the compost level with the surface for containerised plants or use the soil mark on the stem as a guide for bare-root plants. Firm the plant in well and water thoroughly.

Gooseberry Plant Care

Other than pruning to keep them neat and productive, watering during dry spells, and feeding in spring to boost harvests, gooseberry plants typically require little care.

Watering

Water newly planted gooseberries regularly for the first growing season until it has become established. After establishment, water when required during dry spells.

Gooseberries in pots often struggle more in dry conditions, so regularly check the compost throughout the growing season, and water generously when it starts to feel dry. Also make sure that rain water can drain out of the holes in the pot's base in winter by raising it onto feet or bricks. Waterlogged compost can cause root rot.





Feeding

Use one and a half handfuls of a general fertiliser with a high potassium content per square meter around the plants' bases in the early spring. Feeding too much nitrogen can encourage sappy growth, susceptible to mildew.

Mulching

To retain moisture in the soil, mulch the plant base with organic matter following early spring feeding. On damp ground, a layer of mulch 5 cm thick will work well. To keep the stem from rotting, leave a gap around the base.

Supporting

Except for bush plants, all trained forms require supports. When it is time to plant use a sturdy bamboo cane, up to 1.7 meters tall for cordons and 1 meter tall for standards, inserted to maintain the main stem's stability.

Additionally, fans and cordons require a system of horizontal wires—typically two at 60 cm and 1.2 meters above the ground and attached to posts, walls, or fences. On bamboo canes that are attached to the wires, tie the stems with a figure-of-eight loop. Do this on a regular basis as they grow.

Pruning and training

Prune twice a year—in the summer and in the winter—to keep plants healthy and in good shape and to ensure large fruit crops.

Gooseberries can be trained into bushes, cordons, standards, and fans, all of which require slightly different pruning procedures.



HARVESTING GOOSEBERRIES

It is encouraged to make two pickings, with a month or two apart. Pick every other fruit in June, when they are still green and underripe, and use it to make jam, pies, tarts, and sauces. After that, the remaining fruits should get bigger than if you let them all ripen together. In July and August, pick the remaining fruits when they are ripe for the best flavour and sweetness. Take care when picking fully ripe gooseberries because they are likely to burst and are soft.

Gooseberries are best consumed fresh, but they can be stored for up to a week in the refrigerator. Overabundance natural product can be placed into polythene packs and frozen or made into jelly.

PROBLEMS

Gooseberry sawfly, aphids, capsid bugs, and woolly vine or currant scale are among the pests that can harm gooseberries. Fine-gauge netting should be used to protect ripening gooseberries from bullfinches in the winter and birds in the summer because birds love gooseberries. Also keep an eye out for diseases like coral spot, botrytis, and grey mould. Some varieties of gooseberries are resistant to mildew.

Cover the plants with horticultural fleece overnight if frost is predicted while they are flowering, then remove it during the day to allow pollinating insects access to the flowers.



FAQ'S

Are gooseberries easy to grow?

Vigorous, hardy and happy to grow in sun or light shade, gooseberries are not difficult to take care of, both in the ground and in containers.

Do gooseberry bushes fruit in the first year?

Your gooseberry plant will begin producing fruit the season after planting, but as it becomes more established in the ground, it will increase its yield. A gooseberry bush typically produces fruit for 20 years, with the help of pruning each year at the end of the season, as fruit is produced on branches no more than 3 years old.

What can you plant with gooseberry plants?

Beans, tomatoes and chives are great companion plants for gooseberry plants.