AGRI-FACTS
Practical Information for Alberta's Agriculture Industry

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Currants and Gooseberries in Alberta

Gooseberries and some currants are native to Canada. They can be grown successfully throughout Alberta and are valued for both their fruit and ornamental qualities.

At present, commercial production of black currants covers many acres in Alberta; however, this factsheet will focus on home garden production.

For small yards, where larger fruit trees are not practical, currants and gooseberries provide a good fruit substitute. The berries have high levels of vitamin C (especially black currants) and are used fresh and preserved.

Soil and location

Gooseberries and currants prefer a cool moist soil. A well-drained, rich clay loam soil with a pH 6 to 7.5 is ideal. If the soil is sandy, incorporate peat moss, compost or well rotted manure to a 15 cm depth before planting. Mulching with grass clippings, bark chips or chopped straw will conserve moisture and maintain a cool soil temperature.

Gooseberries and currants prefer a cool moist soil

Preparing the planting site

Summer fallow the planting site for one season prior to planting to help rid the site of persistent weeds, such as Canada thistle, quack grass, sow thistle and bindweed.

Currants and gooseberries are heavy feeders and long term crops, so apply a heavy dressing of well rotted manure, and dig or plow the land prior to planting. At planting time, apply 90 mL of 11-51-0 fertilizer around the base of each plant. This fertilizer is high in phosphorous and will help the new plants develop strong root systems.

Obtaining the plants

Currants and gooseberries can be obtained either from a reliable nursery or from a neighbor's disease-free bushes. If the plants are to be selected from an established planting, they may be propagated by layering or from cuttings. Layering is done in the late spring to provide plants for removal from the parent. A lower branch of a bush is bent over, and covered with soil, leaving about 15 cm of the branch tip exposed. Roots then form along the buried branch, and the new plant is easily removed and transplanted the following spring.

Cuttings are taken in the fall after the leaves have dropped. Use vigorous shoots of the present season's growth, and make cuttings 20 to 25 cm long. Make the lower cut square and immediately below a bud, and make the upper cut sloping and about 1 cm above the top bud. Place the cuttings upside down in slightly moist sand or soil in a box. Store in a cool basement or in a cold frame under 30 cm of soil. Plant the cuttings in a sheltered spot in the garden in early spring. Dig a trench about 20 cm wide, and lay the cuttings on the sloping side about 15 cm apart. Set deep enough so that only one bud is above the ground. Fill the trench and firm the soil against the cuttings. Keep the soil moist to promote rooting.

Planting

Plant currants and gooseberries in the spring before they leaf out or in early in September after the leaves have dropped. Set red, black, white currants and gooseberries in rows 3 to 4 m apart and 1.0 to 1.5 m apart in the row. Plant albol currants in rows 4 m apart, with 2 m between plants.

Alberta

Annual fertilization

Where organic matter is lacking in the soil, apply liberal amounts of manure in the fall, and work lightly into the soil. Before the plants blossom in the spring, measure out 150 mL of 23-23-0 or 27-14-0 fertilizer with a liquid measuring cup, and spread the fertilizer under the branches and to 30 cm beyond each plant. Lightly incorporate the fertilizer into the soil.

Cultivation

Hoeing controls weeds and helps control diseases and insects. Cultivation should be kept shallow, because deep cultivation damages roots and encourages unwanted sucker growth.

Pruning

Red, white and albol currants and gooseberries

Red, white and albol currants bear most of their fruit on spurs of 2- and 3-year-old wood. Spurs are shortened branches with many buds and a cluster of leaves forming laterally on main branches. Gooseberries bear fruit along the sides of 1-year shoots and also on the spurs of 2- and 3-year-old wood.

In the spring, one year after planting, remove weaker shoots. Leave no more than six of the strongest first-year shoots. In the third spring, leave six shoots, with three 2-year shoots and three 1-year shoots. In the fourth year, leave about nine shoots; three 1-year, three 2-year and three 3-year shoots.

The aim of pruning this way is to have vigorous young shoots always coming on to take the place of wood more than three years old. After this time, the wood generally becomes less productive. In subsequent years, remove the wood that is older than three years.

Black currant

Black currants bear most of their fruit on the previous season's growth (one-year-old wood). Maintain approximately eight fruiting canes. Some pruning may be necessary the first spring following planting, to shape the bush and limit the number of main branches to six or eight.

Each succeeding spring, leave three or four 2-year canes and six 1-year-old canes. If the plant is more vigorous, a higher number of shoots can be left unpruned. The tips of black currant branches should not be cut back as this pruning will reduce fruit production.

Pollination

Currants and gooseberries are self fertile and insect pollinated, so there is no need for interplanting different varieties for cross pollination. They may set larger amounts of fruit if two or more cultivars are interplanted.

Harvesting

Gooseberries bear a major crop in the fourth season, with a small harvest in the second and third year. Harvest berries for jelly making when the fruit is slightly green, but for preserving, pick fruit when it is ripe. The berries often ripen unevenly and fall soon after ripening; therefore, two or three pickings will be necessary.

Pick red and white currants as soon as they are clear in color. Pick the whole cluster to avoid injuring the delicate fruit. Pick black currants selectively as they ripen, before they shrivel and fall.

Currant cultivars

Red currants

Red lake: Upright bush, good quality mild-flavored, glossy, bright-red berries, borne on long clusters, ripens mid-season. The plant is subject to mildew.

Red cross: Large, vigorous productive bushes, short to medium clusters of round, glossy bright, light red berries ripening mid-season.

Perfection: Plants tend to spread, large, well-flavored berries, ripens mid-season.

Black currants

Ben nevis: Resistant to mildew, medium size fruit.

Willoughby. Medium sized, upright bush, heavy bearer of mild-flavored fruit. The plant is very resistant to mildew.

Magnus: Early ripening, fair productivity of medium clusters, firm medium to medium-large berries, even ripening. Cool spring weather can cause premature fruit drop.

White currants

White grape: Medium-sized bush. Large amber-colored, mild-flavored fruit.

White imperial: High yielding plant, fruit makes excellent jam and jelly.

Gooseberry cultivars

Pixwell: Moderately vigorous, good producer, very hardy, rounded bush. The fruit is medium sized, pinkish-red, good-quality and is good for jelly, preserves and sauce.

Welcome: Large, bright red, tart berries on nearly thornless branches.

Pembina pride: Vigorous, upright bush, berries large, green fruit at maturity. The fruit is good for processing and matures early.

Invicta: mid-season, large green fruit.

Albol currant

The albol currant (*Ribes aureum* "Albol") is frequently grown as an ornamental, and its value as a fruiting shrub is often overlooked. Albol is also commonly known as the Missouri, Colorado, California, Golden Flowering Clove or Cross Currant. The shrubs reach a height of 1 to 2.5 m. The fruit is good for canning, jam, pies and wine. Crandall and Black Giant are the named varieties available from many Alberta nurseries. Albol currants tolerate hot, dry weather and are well-adapted to Alberta conditions.

Jostaberry

The jostaberry is a cross between a black currant and a gooseberry. The thornless bush produces large clusters of dark black berries. The berries are high in vitamin C and are well-suited for making jam, jelly, juice and wine. The cultural requirements for the plant are similar to those of the black currant.

For information on commercial production of currants and gooseberries in Alberta, contact:

Alberta Agriculture and Food
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Call toll-free: 310-FARM (3276)

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