



## How to Grow Gooseberry Bushes

An ideal fruit for the small garden - gooseberry bushes are easy to grow, produce a large amount of fruit for their size and will tolerate partial shade conditions. They are self-fertile, so one bush can be grown on its own. Gooseberry bushes are also well able to withstand harsher conditions (both temperature and wind) than many other fruits. This makes them a good choice for cooler areas.

Usually grown in the form of a small bush, they can be trained to any shape and are especially recommended for pot culture.

### Where to Grow Your Gooseberry Bush

Gooseberry bushes are very tolerant of different conditions, although in an ideal setting they prefer full sun in cooler areas. The lower temperatures allow the fruit to mature slowly rather than being cooked into maturity by a warm sun. They are well-suited to the Midlands and North West of England. Tolerant of partial shade, a North facing wall suits it fine.

Unfortunately, gooseberries are not so tolerant of bad soil conditions - they need a medium weight soil which is well-drained but not dry. They need moisture in the soil if the fruits are to develop fully. They do not require a very fertile soil, too fertile and the plant produces too much weak green growth at the expense of good fruit.

### Planting

The best time to plant is October; the soil is still warm, and this allows the roots to establish themselves quickly before the rest of the plant begins to put on new spring growth. Any time up to February is satisfactory, as long as the soil is not frozen or water-logged.

Fork over a wide area to break up the soil and remove weeds, then dig out a planting hole. Fork some compost or rotted manure into the soil at the base, along with a handful of granular or pelleted general purpose fertiliser.

Plant bare-rooted bushes by spreading their roots out in the hole and covering with well-conditioned soil. Firm the soil down around the roots. With container-grown bushes, keep the surface of the root ball compost level with the surrounding soil surface. Space cordons 30cm-45cm (12in to 18in) apart and bushes at least 1.2m (4ft) apart to allow access for picking.

Gooseberry bushes need the soil to be kept moist so keep plants well watered until established, and especially when the fruit is being formed. In dry periods during June to August, water them to keep the soil moist.

Put a layer of organic material 5cm to 7.5cm (2in to 3in) thick to act as a mulch around (but not touching) the main stem each spring. Where no organic material is available, incorporate a couple of handfuls into the top soil around the bush and cover the soil with bark chipping or similar to prevent the growth of weeds. A couple of handfuls of bone meal applied again September should be all that is needed.

If you aren't growing your gooseberries in a fruit cage, cover bushes with netting during June and July to protect from birds. Ensure it's weighted down at the base to prevent blackbirds getting underneath.

### Cultivation

The easiest method of propagating gooseberries is by cuttings rather than raising from seed. Healthy shoots can be cut in autumn and early winter to use as hardwood cuttings which can be used to raise new bushes which should fruit in 1-2 years.



## **Pruning**

Fruits form on old wood and around the base of last year's growth. Therefore prune back the previous year's growth to two buds.

Winter pruning in February each year helps to form a balanced branch structure and keeps the centre of the bush open to make picking easier. The aim is to achieve a wine glass shape with the centre of the bush reasonably clear of growth. Mildew disease is also reduced if air circulation is encouraged. Prune out any shoots that are growing into the centre of the bush, and cut back leaders by one-third.

Summer pruning isn't essential, but if possible prune side shoots back to five leaves in June. This will allow the sun to reach into the centre of the bush and help ripen the fruit.

Single-stemmed cordons can be trained on canes or against a wall where they can reach 1.8m (6ft) tall. In summer, prune side shoots back to five leaves to encourage fruiting spurs to develop.

Tie the leading shoot tip into the support as it grows. In winter, shorten the previous year's growth on the main tip back by a quarter to encourage new side shoots. Shorten side shoots pruned in summer to two or three buds.

Start thinning gooseberries during late May or early June, removing about half the crop. The fruits from this first harvest can be used for cooking. This will give a longer cropping season and leaves others more room to grow to a larger size.

## **Pests and Diseases**

Gooseberry bushes grown in the UK are remarkably free from pests and diseases. They can be attacked by the common Gooseberry Sawfly caterpillars from late spring onwards which are capable of stripping the plant of all foliage.

Defoliation of the bushes is caused by the caterpillar-like larvae, which are up to 20mm (almost ¾in) long. The larvae are pale green, with many black spots, and they have black heads

As soon as foliage damage is noticed, examine the plant for caterpillars and pick them off by hand. If the numbers of caterpillars are large, spray with an insecticide available at almost all garden centres.

Its eggs are laid on fallen gooseberry leaves so careful removal of fallen leaves and tilling of the ground around the plant will also destroy most eggs and chrysalises of these insects.

Always try to grow varieties resistant to mildew.