# Gooseberry

Ribes uva-crispa and Ribes hirtellum are members of the Saxifragaceae (saxifrage) family.

Most gooseberries are derived from two species: the European gooseberry (*Ribes uva-crispa*), native to the Caucausus Mountains and North Africa, and the American gooseberry (*R. hirtellum*), native to the northeastern and north central United States and Canada. The gooseberry bush has thorny, arching branches that give the plant a height and breadth of 3 to 5 feet. Flowers are self-fertile and are pollinated by wind and insects, but usually not by honey bees. The fruit may be green, white, or yellow, or various shades of red. Fruits of different cultivars range from pea-sized to the size of a chicken's egg. Fruit characteristics and flavors vary from sour pulp and tough skins to tender skins and aromatic, sweet pulp.

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## Market Information

Use. Gooseberries are picked slightly underripe for cooking in jams, pies, and a classic dish, "gooseberry fool," made by folding cream into the stewed fruit. Fully ripe fruits of Poorman, Whitesmith, Hinnomakis Yellow, Achilles, and Whinham's Industry cultivars are excellent eaten fresh. Gooseberries are popular among northern Europeans, but little known in America. Before 1966, U.S. federal law banned the gooseberry plant as a cause of white pine blister rust. Since the ban was lifted, interest is growing in the United States.

## Culture

Climatic requirements. Gooseberries tolerate temperatures to  $-30^{\circ}$ F or lower, depending on the cultivar. They do not tolerate extremely hot summers, particularly if they are very dry. The bushes thrive in cool, well-drained, fertile soils. In warm regions, bushes perform better in heavier soils that retain moisture and keep cooler. An organic mulch helps protect the shallow roots. The gooseberry bush will thrive in full sun or in partial shade. In warmer summer areas, plant them in partial shade or on a north-facing slope.

**Propagation and care.** American cultivars are easier than European cultivars to propagate from cuttings. Hardwood cuttings about 1 foot long (not including tip growth) can be taken in the fall, preferably before all leaves have fallen. Tip and mound layering are more reliable methods of prop-



These gooseberries are ripe and ready for harvest. (Photo: Bernadine Strik)

agation, but a single bush furnishes fewer tip layers than cuttings, and mound layering sacrifices the fruit crop for the whole growing season. Either way, roots form where the stems are in the soil, and the small plants will be ready for transplanting by the first or second fall, depending on the cultivar.

Plant bushes 4 to 6 feet apart depending on cultivar vigor and soil. Do not plant bushes close to one another, or the arching branches of adjacent bushes will make pruning and picking difficult. Set bare-root plants in the ground in the fall or as early as possible in late winter or early spring.

Gooseberry bushes can be grown in either of two ways: on a permanent, short "leg," which is a trunk about 6 inches long, or as a "stool," where the bush is continually renewed with new shoots arising at or near ground level. Leg bushes grow large fruit that are easier to pick and are more accessible for pest control, but significant damage to the single leg can mean the loss of the entire bush. Stool bushes live longer and bear greater numbers of fruit than leg bushes, but their fruit are smaller.

To grow the gooseberry bush on a short leg, start\_with a cutting from which you have removed all but the uppermost four or five buds. You may instead want to leave all buds in place to encourage rooting, and then pull (but not cut) the lower buds off when you lift the young plants for transplanting.

The winter after the leg plant's first growing season, remove all but three or four vigorous branches pointing upward and outward. Head these primary branches back to 6 inches to stiffen them and induce further branching. Next winter, head the new secondary branches similarly—there should be a halfdozen or so. These will be the plant's permanent leaders, and should be pruned each subsequent winter by one-quarter of their new growth. Fruiting and age will slow the leaders' growth, so all they eventually will need will be a light tipping or nothing at all. Snap off any new branches that form along or below the initial 6-inch leg.

Off these leaders, lateral branches will grow that can be left to bear fruit along their whole length or shortened to make fewer, larger fruits. At the very least, cut away any laterals that are crossing, drooping, or otherwise misplaced. Another approach is to shorten all laterals to about 5 inches in early July, and then to cut them further back to about 2 inches during winter. This close pruning has the benefit of cutting away some mildewed branch tips and keeping the bush open to air, sun, and sprays. Such plants also make fruit picking easier.

To grow the bush as a stooled plant, you need not remove any buds from the initial cutting. The winter after the plant's first season in the ground, cut away all but about four of the previous season's shoots. Do the same thing the second winter so the bush will have four 1-year-old and four 2year-old shoots. After the third winter's pruning, the bush will have four each of 1-, 2-, and 3-yearold shoots.

In the fourth and subsequent winters, cut away all 4-year-old shoots and all but about four of the most recent year's new shoots that grew up from ground level. The bush will then continue to have four each of 1-, 2-, and 3-year-old shoots. Except for lanky shoots that need shortening, all pruning of a stooled plants is done by cutting away branches at ground level. An excess number of canes may reduce fruit size and quality and may increase the plant's susceptibility to powdery mildew.

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A gooseberry bush has a moderate need for nitrogen and a high potassium requirement. Avoid potassium deficiency with an annual dressing of ½ ounce of actual potassium per square yard. When liming the soil, use dolomitic limestone to provide the magnesium that the plants also need.

**Pests.** American gooseberry mildew can ruin gooseberries overnight under certain weather conditions. Fungicide sprays and correct fertilization, especially with nitrogen and potassium, can limit the disease. Leafspot can be controlled with orchard sanitation and sprays. Cultivars vary in their susceptibility to leafspot and mildew. The imported currantworm and fruitworm can be controlled with insecticides early in the season.

## Sources

## More information

Antonelli, A., et al. *Small Fruit Pests — Biology, Diagnosis, and Management.* 1988. Publication EB 1388. Washington State University Agricultural Communications, Pullman, WA.

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## Plants

Alexander Eppler Ltd., P.O. Box 16513, Seattle, WA 98116-0513

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