

INTRODUCTION

Gooseberries are a traditional crop and have recently enjoyed something of a revival. The berries are ready in July and last on the bush well, this means the season can last for a month or, more. They can be picked as a once over harvest or selectively picked to catch the early season market. Gooseberries are well known by the public and are versatile in the kitchen.

SITE

A plantation can last for 10 or more years, so the preparation and planning is essential. Most well drained soils will be suitable but heavy clay soils can be difficult. Very light sandy soils will benefit from an irrigation system.

Any perennial weeds, especially thistles and couch grass should be cleared prior to planting. Incorporation of well-rotted manures is an advantage in soil preparation.

Instead of herbicides, organic (and other) growers can install permeable membrane (e.g. Mypex) ground cover over pre-formed beds. Raised beds are recommended as they improve drainage. Raised beds or rows can be achieved by ploughing furrows together or using a potato ridger.

When planning any new crops it is always advisable to conduct a soil analysis. For gooseberries bring Phosphate, Potash and Magnesium levels up to Index 2 and start with a pH no lower than 6.5.

PRUNING

Depending on your stock it might be worth pruning the bushes to shape before planting. This involves removing low down shoots and any obvious poor, weak, and damaged branches. This may take out a lot of the bush but it is better to do it before planting rather than if the bushes have been left to develop for a year and then attempting pruning.

Prune your established gooseberries from leaf fall until March. Older bushes need to have the centre re-opened up to allow access to the fruit on the thorny branches. The sooner this centre wood is removed the better. Envisage a wine glass and aim to replicate this shape in the bush.

Gooseberries are quite different from blackcurrants in that they produce fruit on older wood. Therefore they do not need the dramatic renewal pruning. Conventionally, gooseberries are grown on a leg or small trunk some 150-200mm in length. It is worth establishing a leg in new plantations as they are easier to manage and good stock should have the beginnings of this leg when purchased. Maintain the leg by removing any basal suckers that appear.

To reduce plant or crop damage remove any wood that will be near the ground during the growing season. Excessively long whippy material can be shortened to encourage upward growth. Many gooseberry varieties do have thorns and so a pair of gloves is essential when pruning.

Occasionally gooseberries are grown on trellises, in this situation the plant growth is tied to a pre-constructed frame work fill in the desired location.



PLANTING

The ideal time to plant is November, as the bushes can make root while shoots are dormant. However, early spring through to March, often gives good results.

Plant bushes at 4m spacing between rows. If you are going to maintain the site with a narrow tractor or by hand then the bushes can be planted closer together. Bushes should eventually spread 1.3m across, so it is recommended to use this as the spacing down the row. This works out to around 1,930 bushes per hectare.

When planting the gooseberry bushes ensure the root is covered, but do not be afraid to put them in shallowly to enhance the leg.

One or two-year old bushes can be bought from the growers or propagators. A two-year bush gives a better start as long as the propagator has done some formative work for you.

After planting, a herbicide treatment or a mulch application will be needed to prevent weeds establishing.

VARIETIES

- **Invicta**, is very easy to grow as it is powdery mildew resistant and a strong grower – however, it will not tolerate wet soils.
- **Careless** is another standard and can be kept free of mildew
- **Pax** is the best red skinned variety
- **Rokula** tends to be too down held or weeping to make a good bush.
- **Leveller** and **Winhams Industry** can be susceptible to mildew

Other varieties are available and can be trialled to see how they suit your farm.

STOCK SOURCING

Good stock, that has been acclimatised in Wales is available from:

- Welsh Fruit Stocks, visit www.welshfruitstocks.co.uk. They offer a wide range of fruits including organic.
- Hargreaves Plants, www.hargreavesplants.com
- R W Walpole Ltd www.rwwalpole.co.uk online catalogue.
- Winsors (email: winsorfarms@hotmail.co.uk), a specialist propagator

Most propagators will sell out early in the season and so ordering in advance is recommended.

MARKETS

Gooseberries are commonly sold fresh in punnets weighing, 225g or 450g. They are a good crop for Pick Your Own (PYO) as they can be ready to pick from July. When pricing gooseberries consider that some PYO customers can pick up to 2kg in a large basket. Gooseberries can also be mixed with other soft fruits to sell at farmers markets and farm shops.

The shelf life of gooseberries, once chilled to 2°C can be up to two weeks.