



## Gooseberries for Illinois

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Gooseberries (*Ribes uva-crispa*) are one of the most overlooked small fruits in Illinois. They have been cultivated in England since the 13<sup>th</sup> century. They became so popular that at one time gooseberry clubs were established in Great Britain. European gooseberries were brought to America by early settlers, but never grew well because they were susceptible to the American gooseberry mildew and the climatic conditions were unsuitable. Mildew-resistant gooseberries have been developed, but their popularity never caught on and the plants are not commercially important in most areas of the world.

In the home garden, the thorned bushes are often found along fencerows or in some out-of-the-way place, left to shift for themselves in grass and weeds. In spite of neglect, they will produce fair crops of fruit, though of inferior size and quality.

Given good care in cultivation, fertilization, pruning, and spraying, the best varieties will produce abundant high quality crops. Eight to twelve quarts of fruit per bush are easily obtainable.

Gooseberries are easy to grow, seldom fail to produce a crop, and are easily kept within bounds in the row. The picking season is long, and the fruit may usually be allowed to hang on the bushes for some time after maturity. Ripening begins just after strawberries and overlaps that of early raspberries. Therefore, gooseberries can serve as a crop to fill in between other fruits.

Most people don't appreciate the appetizing qualities of gooseberries. The use of gooseberries is limited chiefly to jelly, jam, and pies. However, there are many other ways in which these fruits can be utilized – for preserves, marmalades, and spiced products. They are especially delectable when combined with other fruits, as, for example, in gooseberry/raspberry jam. The fruit may be canned or frozen whole to be used in pies for winter, or the juice may be extracted and preserved for home use.

**Adaptation.** Gooseberries are native northern plants and are frequently found growing wild in a cool, moist climate in a situation where some shade is provided. While they are among the hardiest of our native fruits to cold, they are sensitive to heat and drought. They are more at home in the northern half of the state, although by a careful choice of site and soil and by care in providing good growing conditions, they may be raised in all sections of Illinois.

**Site and Soil.** A cool northern slope, which provides protection from the sun, is preferable as a site for planting, even in the northern half of the state. The shade afforded by a building or trees in a small orchard may be utilized when only a few plants are being grown for home use. Good air drainage is important for disease prevention. Gooseberries will not grow well in poorly drained soil, especially where water stands, or on sand where leaf drop and fruit scald may occur during heat and drought.

**Growth habit.** Gooseberries grow as a deciduous thorny shrub that is native to the cooler northern regions of Europe. The gooseberry produces fruit on spurs, which develop on the older wood and at the base of the previous season's lateral growth. For this reason, the gooseberry can be grown with a permanent set of branches, which becomes the basic unit for pruning and training. Gooseberries have spines at their nodes. These make it difficult to pick and handle. Nearly spineless cultivars have been developed, but the most popular cultivars, such as 'Welcome', and 'Pixwell' have short spines.

**Fruits.** Gooseberry fruits can be smooth, hairy, yellow, green, white, pink, or intensely red depending on the cultivar. The fruit of the gooseberry is oval, firm, and is very crispy unless it is overripe when the texture becomes more mealy. In general, the fruits are acid with degree of acidity being a function of the stage at which they were picked.

**Plant Selection.** Plants should be one to two years old with good root systems. Poorly grown stock of small size should not be planted. Only vigorous, well-grown, well-rooted plants are worth setting. They should be carefully examined for insects and diseases, such as San Jose' scale, cane borers, and cane blight. Prune out infested parts before planting, or better yet, try to find pest-free stock.

Although no one cultivar has all the best qualities, there are several which have become well known for their general performance.

*Fredonia* (red) – moderately vigorous and productive; late maturing and large-fruited.

*Poorman* (red) – moderately productive, hardy and vigorous. Does quite well on heavy soils. Fruit is medium size and of good quality. Plants are less thorny than most varieties.

*Welcome* (green-pink) – productive; medium size bush; moderate thorns. The fruit is medium-sized, turning pink to light red when ripe. Relatively easy to pick or strip.

*Pixwell* (red) – hardy, productive variety. Canes have limited thorns. Fruit is medium in size, pink when ripe and often borne in clusters.

Gooseberries are self-fertile; therefore a single variety can be planted. However, planting more than one can extend the picking season.

**Soil Preparation.** Since the plants live for several years, soil preparation prior to planting is important. Gooseberries grow well in soils high in organic matter. If you have a light-colored soil with low organic matter, work one or two inches of compost, manure, or other well-rotted material into the soil. If the soil is high in organic matter, its addition is unnecessary. Rich soils produce too much succulent growth that is subject to diseases, such as mildew, and breakage in wind or snow.

**Planting.** Plants may be set out either in fall or in early spring. Dig a hole wide enough to contain the entire root system when they are spread. Prior to planting, it is a good idea to trim off broken or diseased roots and all shoots that are too near the ground. Plant with the lowest branch at or just below the soil line. This forces new shoots to rise from below the soil level forming a bush rather than a single stem. The plants should be spaced 4 feet apart; if more than one row is planted, they should be 8 feet apart. Water the plants thoroughly to settle the soil around the roots and water weekly until the plants become established if rainfall is lacking.

**Fertilizing and watering.** Fertilize gooseberries during in early spring with 12-12-12, about 2 ounces per plant. The fertilizer should be placed in a band around the base of each plant. If manure is available, one to two inches can be placed around the base of each plant. Gooseberries need about one inch of water per week. When fruit is ripening, avoid heavy watering because the fruits may split.

**Weed control.** The plants are comparatively shallow rooted when grown under an organic mulch. In a cultivated soil, they will root more deeply. Deep cultivation has a harmful effect upon the roots and should be done with caution. Mulches can also be beneficial in suppressing weed growth and retaining soil moisture and keeping the soil cooler during the summer months. Strawy manure, straw, old hay, composted lawn rakings, sawdust, chopped cornstalks, and granulated peat are all suitable. Apply the mulch 4 to 6 inches deep around plants at any time and replenish annually to this depth.

**Pruning.** Pruning should be done annually to produce good crops of quality fruit. The plants usually bear fruit just at the base of the previous season's growth or in short spurs on older wood. These spur-like growths are comparatively short-lived. It is easiest to prune in late winter while the plants are still dormant and before growth begins. Because gooseberries produce their fruits on spurs on older wood and at the base of one-year-old laterals, gooseberry pruning is designed to retain short laterals and

insure a supply of vigorous new canes to replace the older branches as they become less productive or too spreading. In general, the most productive gooseberry wood is less than four years old. Therefore a major goal of pruning is to insure that wood of all ages from one year to four years old is present. Pruning should involve a renewal process where one or two of the oldest branches are cut out and new shoots are allowed to grow to replace them.

Gooseberries tend to grow as drooping bushes. You can overcome this growth habit by pruning leaders to inward- or upward-facing buds or by pruning back to upright laterals. The leaders can be shortened by about half, cutting back to a bud that is facing in the correct direction. The center of the plant can also be left open to make picking and spraying easier. The combination of open center and upright growth also helps to increase air circulation under, around, and through the bush to reduce the likelihood of disease infestation.

Once a plant becomes established, shorten all laterals (the current season's growth) to a few leaves (five is probably sufficient). This pruning, which is done in early summer after the plant ceases its production of vigorous new wood, opens up the plant.

Old neglected gooseberry plants can be renovated by removing old canes and thinning out newer shoot growth to initiate the sequence described above. Mature gooseberry plants should have 8 to 10 bearing and 4 to 6 new shoots to replace the oldest canes removed each year.

**Flowering.** The gooseberry should be grown with some shelter from strong wind, especially during flowering, when pollinators may be blown away or discouraged from visiting the planting. The gooseberry flowers very early in the spring and its blossoms may be damaged by frosts. For this reason, avoid planting them in low spots, which are most likely to have frost. On nights of potential frost, you can cover plants with spunbond row cover. This protection must be removed the next morning to allow pollinating insects to enter.

**Harvesting.** Gooseberries can be grown as normal sized fruits for the cultivar, or encouraged to become larger and have better quality by fruit thinning. The larger dessert quality fruits are obtained by removing every other fruit from the cane. The green fruits can be used for cooking. For small or medium sized dessert quality fruits, do not thin the fruits but leave them to ripen and develop their full flavor on the plant. Bird protection may be required. For cooking, pick the gooseberries when they are the proper size, but still green.