

RIBES IN THE HOME GARDEN

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Ribes is the name given to the group of fruits including currants and gooseberries. It's the scientific (genus) name for the group, but has become a common name for the group over the past few years. Gooseberries are grape-like fruits that come in a wide variety of shapes, colors, and sizes. They are usually sweet-fleshed with a sour skin when ripe. They can be eaten fresh when ripe, or used for cooking when ripe or a bit under ripe. Red currants actually come in three main colors...red, pink, and white. They are sweet and sour flavored, good for cooking and used fresh in salads or topping ice cream and other desserts. Pink currants are the sweetest of the red currants and are excellent eaten fresh. Finally, black currants are mainly used for cooking. They have a strong flavor and are quite acid. Some new varieties are being developed for fresh dessert use.



Ribes plants are generally well suited to the northeast. They are very tolerant of cold winter temperatures and somewhat tolerant of spring frosts. You should look for a planting site that has good water and air drainage. Soil type can be loam to a bit heavier loam (such as silty loam). The ideal pH is neutral, and organic matter should be at least 3-5%. All ribes plants respond well to mulch, and if wood chips are used, this will help to improve soil texture and increase organic matter. Plants can be placed 18 inches to three feet apart, depending on which training system will be used (bush or cordon). They should be planted at the same depth they were in the nursery. Irrigation should be available for dry years.

Variety selection is important so that you can get good quality fruit, and plants resistant to disease. The choice of varieties is a bit limited in the US, but there are some good selections for home gardens. For gooseberries, 'Captivator' (red, medium-sized, late) and 'Invicta' (green, large, early) are popular disease-resistant varieties. Red currants include 'Rovada' (red, large, full strigs), 'Blanca' (white, full strigs), and 'Pink Champagne' (pink, sweetest, dessert variety). The best black currant varieties for home gardeners are 'Titania' (large berries, disease immune plants), and 'Ben Sarek' (very large berries, disease resistant). The berries of either variety are sweet if left on the vine to ripen, and can be eaten fresh.

There are three main fungus diseases associated with Ribes, white pine blister rust, mildew, and leaf spot. The first two diseases are easy to control by choosing immune and resistant varieties. There are no varieties immune to leaf spot, only some with a bit of resistance. All of the diseases can be controlled with copper sprays or home garden sprays containing fungicide. The only insect pest that has been of major importance is imported currant worm. This small, green larva can be present in sufficient numbers to completely defoliate a plant in a few days. The pest is very common, but can be controlled by picking off the insects, or providing a protective insect spray. Please check with your extension office for specific spray recommendations as needed.



Training of plants can be done as bushes or cordons. The important point is that fruiting wood must be renewed continually. On bushes, this is done by removing any fruiting canes over three years of age. Cordons are single trunks planted close together. All wood that has produced fruit is removed after the crop is harvested, making way for new wood for the next season. Please contact the extension office for details on pruning and training.

The final question has to do with harvest and storage of fruit. One advantage of ribes is that they have a good shelf life. The berries are not as perishable as raspberries or strawberries. If held in the refrigerator they can last for up to a month in good condition. Gooseberries can be picked slightly under ripe, and they will ripen off the bush. Red currants should be left on the bush until they sweeten up. They turn red (pink or white) before they are fully ripe, which can be deceiving. Finally, black currants should be harvested as the first berries begin to fall to the ground. All berries benefit by being chilled immediately after harvest, and held cold until ready to use. Ideal storage temperature is around 33 F, but refrigerator temperatures of 38 F will suffice for home use.

For more information about growing currants and gooseberries in the home garden, contact local your Master Gardener or county Cooperative Extension office.