

A short guide to growing Bush Fruit

Introduction

The term 'bush fruit' is used to cover those shrubby plants grown for their fruit crop; the term bush being used to distinguish from 'tree' fruit. Bush fruit rarely grows higher than 3-4ft in height, unless left unpruned, and are either multistemmed or multibranched, and includes black-, red-, and white currants, gooseberries, blueberries, as well various hybrid berries. They all have a restricted productive life span, apart from blueberries, and should be replaced after 10-12 years. With the exception of blueberries they all thrive in rich, moisture retentive, but free-draining soil having a pH of 6.5. Blueberries, being ericaceous, require a more acid, and lime-free soil, with a pH of 4.5-5.5

Blackcurrants

Blackcurrants are rich in vitamin C, containing roughly 3 times that of oranges on a weight for weight basis. It was not widely grown in England as a commercial crop until the beginning of the 20th century, though it had been under cultivation for 400-500 years in northern Europe and is thought to have reached the UK in the 17th century. The variety 'Baldwin' was the most widely grown variety in the UK during late 19th century. The need for an alternative, home-grown source of vitamin C was established when imported oranges were scarce during wartime. The main commercial outlet is for juice for a well-established brand of blackcurrant cordial (c.1922). The blackcurrant variety 'Baldwin' was principally used for this cordial at that time, and it is thought that the juice of this variety is still incorporated into the cordial to retain its distinctive flavour. It is for this reason that this old variety is still grown, even though it has been superseded by many newer, more productive varieties, 'Baldwin' is still used as a 'benchmark' in judging the merits of other more recent varieties. Other uses of blackcurrants include jams, pie-fillings and flavourings for yoghurts and smoothies. Freshly picked blackcurrants are not widely available to the retail outlets. The deep colour of blackcurrants is caused by the formation of anthocyanins which have antioxidant properties.

Blackcurrants are almost always grown as a multistemmed 'stooled' bush, where the stems arise beneath, or at, soil level. They prefer an open, though sheltered, sunny site, but some shade can be tolerated. Soil should be rich, deeply dug, free-draining though moisture retentive. They fruit on wood produced from the previous years growth and older.

Blackcurrants are self-fertile and the flowers are mainly insect and wind pollinated. They are borne on multibranched clusters (strigs) and flower fairly early in the season, some varieties being very early. This can give rise to a major problem, as late frosts can damage the flowers, causing them to drop and the crop being severely reduced or lost completely. This problem is called 'run-off'. As the wood becomes older it becomes darker coloured and less productive and so is progressively pruned down to ground level to encourage fresh new growth from the base.

Bushes, when bought, are usually 1-2 years old, though if it has remained unsold in the garden centre, occasional plants can be found that are 3, or more years old. Avoid these if possible, as they are likely to be heavily 'pot-bound' and will be more difficult and slower to establish.

Planting

They are usually planted during the dormant season, between mid October to late March, on previously and thoroughly prepared weed-free ground. Container-grown plants can usually be planted at any time, though care should be taken to ensure that actively growing plants are kept well watered. They should be planted 'deep', usually up to 2" lower than their original depth, in a wide hole sufficient to allow the roots to be spread out. They can be grown either as individual bushes or as a 'hedgerow'. When grown separately allow 4-5 ft between plants, and 5-6' between rows. If grown as a hedgerow they can be planted more closely, of between 1 ½' and 2 ½' apart. Once planted, they should be firmed in, especially round the neck of the bush. Water well, and apply a 2" thick mulch of well-rotted compost or manure around the bush, but not touching the stems. Keep supplied with water until established.

A short guide to growing Bush Fruit

Pruning

After planting in the dormant season, the bush should be pruned hard. Each shoot should be cut right back to one or two buds above ground level, preferably to above an outward-facing bud. This will encourage new shoots to grow from below, or close to, ground level and form the 'stooled' bush, which will then spend its first year becoming better established. However, this will mean foregoing a crop during the first year, which many amateur growers are loth to do. If you can't bring yourself to carry out the hard pruning initially, or the bush was container grown and actively growing when planted, then leave 'til the following autumn, then hard prune, down to ground level, one third of the original shoots, followed by the other thirds in the subsequent two years. Thereafter, continue to remove a third of the oldest growth each year. Also remove damaged or crossing growth, as well as thin 'twiggy' shoots or 'sprue'. The ideal to aim for, is an open-centred bush having 12-15 upright, sturdy growing shoots.

Maintenance

The roots are fibrous and close to the surface. Never dig deeply round the bush, but hoe shallowly (scuffling) to keep down weeds. Alternatively, a weed suppressant membrane may be used instead of a compost or manure mulch, but remember that this will do nothing to feed the soil. Ensure that the bush has an adequate water supply, especially as the fruit begins to swell, using extra irrigation during prolonged dry spells. If irrigation is omitted or neglected during a dry spell the skin of the fruit will start to harden. Subsequent plentiful water supply will cause the fruit to swell and build up pressure within the skin which will then split and the contents ooze out and spoil.

After an initial top-dressing of general fertiliser (growmore or fish, blood and bone) in spring, mulch round the bush with 2" thick layer of well-rotted manure or compost. Don't use wood-chippings as they 'rob' the soil of nitrogen. In mid-late summer, usually at, or after harvest, a light top dressing of a potash rich fertiliser may be applied to help ripen the wood and aid formation of flower initials for the following spring. Protect the flowers from late frosts by choosing a suitable growing position and/or protecting with horticultural fleece. Remove the fleece when no frost threatens to allow access by pollinating insects.

A well-maintained bush will last for around 12-15 years and should then be replaced, planting the new bush in a fresh site that has not been used for growing currants before, or at least for several years. Don't mess about hanging on to old bushes, replace them!

Propagation

Whenever the bushes are pruned, either after initial planting, or in subsequent years, the prunings may be used to make cuttings, which may be struck to increase the stock, or to be grown on as replacements for old and 'tired' bushes. Hardwood cuttings may be taken when the bush is dormant between late September/early October through to late February. Those cuttings taken earlier during this period have a better chance of success as there is longer to form a 'callus' containing the root initials before bud break in the spring.. Cuttings should be taken from a healthy disease-free sturdy shoot (about pencil thickness) that has grown during the summer. Cut a shoot of well-ripened wood around 11-12" in length and trim off the weak top growth above a bud (slightly slanted away from the bud). Then cut below a bud at the bottom end using a straight cut, to leave a cutting 8-9" in length. Do not remove or damage any of the buds and insert the cutting, either in the new growing position, or on a nursery bed, so that only the top two buds are above ground level. Three cuttings 6" apart may be grouped together if planting them in the eventual growing position. When initially taken the cuttings will form a callus of tissue at the cut end in the soil and within this tissue 'root initials' will form. When the buds break in the spring, a hormonal signal will then cause the root initials to develop into roots which will grow and develop during the summer. Keep the cuttings moist, but neither waterlogged or allowed to dry out. Leave the cuttings undisturbed until leaf fall in the autumn, before replanting in their final growing position. Hormone rooting powder is usually unnecessary, so save the expense.

An alternative, though rarely used, method of propagation is by means of layering. Select a drooping branch and bend it down so part of it is touching the soil and peg it in position with

A short guide to growing Bush Fruit

a staple of wire. Then heap more soil over the staple. Walk away and leave for twelve months, then sever the connection with the parent bush. Lift the rooted shoot and replant during the dormant season.

A further method, again rarely used, is to take semi-ripe tip cuttings 3-4" long during mid-/late summer, strip off the lower leaves, insert in gritty compost round the rim of a plant pot and cover with a polythene tent. Mist, as necessary, to keep from drying out. They should have taken root after about 10-12 weeks, and may be re-potted singly or planted in a sheltered nursery bed.

Pests & Diseases

The main pests that affect blackcurrants are aphids and big-bud gall mite.

Aphids will usually attack young succulent growing points in spring and early summer, and by their sap-sucking activity will weaken, causing distorted tip growth, or kill, the growing tip completely. Use a proprietary insecticide, but do not spray when bush is in flower as this may affect pollinating insects or damage the blossom.. Another type of aphid, the currant blister aphid attacks more mature leaves. They feed on the underside of the leaf and cause pinkish coloured blisters or a 'bubbly' appearance to the upper leaf surface. Redcurrants are usually most susceptible to this pest, though they will attack blackcurrants.

Big-bud gall mite is microscopic in size and difficult to see, though its effect is only too obvious, especially during the dormant season. They make a 'nest' in, and feed on buds causing them to swell up to pea-shaped and pea-sized buds, which rarely develop, but die and drop off, while the mites colonise other buds. Each bud can contain numerous mites, and by their sap sucking activity can infect the bush with a virus called 'reversion virus' which causes the bush to revert to a wild form with smaller leaves and severely reduced cropping ability of tiny berries. Pick off the buds and burn if only lightly infested, or prune out and burn more severely affected shoots. If the whole bush is infested there is nothing to be done except dig out the whole bush and destroy by burning. There is no cure for reversion virus. Of the other diseases, there are mainly two which may affect blackcurrant.

'American gooseberry mildew' can affect blackcurrants, especially if grown in proximity to gooseberry bushes. A white powdery fungal growth affects the shoot tips initially, and if left untreated will spread to larger leaves and fruit. It usually occurs where there is lush soft sappy growth caused by over availability of nitrogen nutrient (overfeeding with fertiliser), or by overcrowded shoot growth, through lack of, or poor pruning. A mild infection should be cut out and burnt to avoid further spread, and the bush should be pruned to give a cup shaped form to let in plenty of light and air. A preventative spray of myclobutanil based fungicide (Bio Systhane) should be applied in spring at the time of bud-burst.

The other fungal disease that may appear is 'leaf spot' which causes brownish/black necrotic spotting on leaves. Again, early growth fungicide may be applied preventatively in spring.

Varieties

From the four varieties named by the RHS in the 1850's the choice of varieties has widened enormously. In the UK much of the breeding and introduction of new varieties has been carried out by the East Malling Horticultural Research station in Kent and the Scottish Crop Research Institute at Invergowrie near Dundee. Some UK nurseries have also introduced their own varieties and there have been introductions from northern Europe. Those that originated at East Malling usually have 'Malling' in the name of the variety, whilst the SCRI have adopted the prefix 'Ben' in the names of their introductions. It must be remembered that these institutions raise their plants mainly with an eye to the commercial growing sector, (their paymasters), rather than the amateur gardener, though all varieties are capable of being grown successfully even by gardeners new to fruit growing.

In addition to the newer varieties there is still a fairly wide choice of older 'heritage' varieties available from specialist nurseries. The choice available from most garden centres will usually be severely limited and maybe restricted mainly to older, more well-known varieties. For the amateur the choice really lies with the time of flowering, rather than the time of cropping, as they are rarely grown with market timing in mind. The other consideration may be disease resistance, though this means that they are either less susceptible or better able

A short guide to growing Bush Fruit

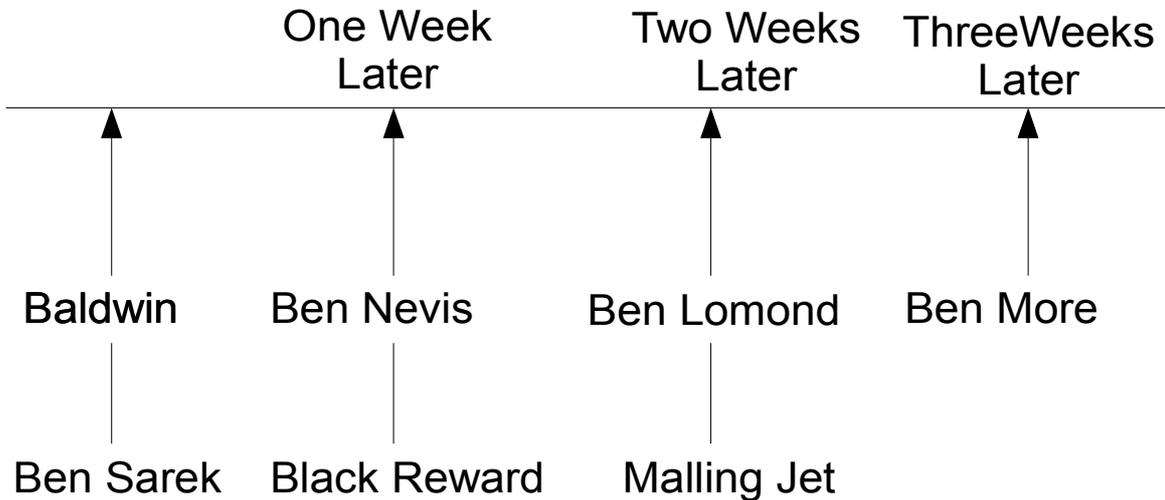
to withstand the disease, it does not mean that they have total immunity. The final choice is a personal thing, but should be considered carefully, as once made you're stuck with it for the next dozen years. The following are a few pointers for guidance, rather than recommendations, and there are many other varieties available, so it is worthwhile studying catalogues, before making a hasty decision.

If the growing area is in a cooler, frostier situation it would be preferable to choose a variety that flowers later in the spring, to avoid blossom damage by late frosts. The old variety '**Baldwin**' flowers early, and can be more at risk of frost damage. Many of the more recently introduced varieties, like 'Ben Sarek' that flower at around the same time have been bred so that they are less susceptible to frost damage, though it's still worth affording some fleece protection. **Ben Sarek** also ripens upto a fortnight earlier than Baldwin in late July. It forms a compact bush which can be planted more closely together, at 3ft-3½ft intervals, or even in a container, and is suitable for smaller gardens with restricted growing space.

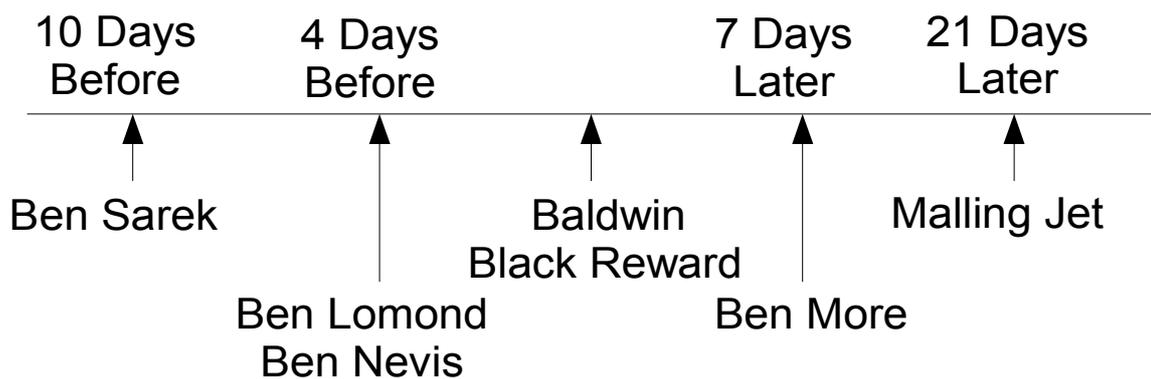
One of the more widely commercially grown varieties is **Ben Hope**, which flowers later and thus avoids most frost damage. It crops later than many other varieties, upto two weeks later than Baldwin. It is also a very 'forgiving' variety, tolerating poorer soils and growing conditions as well as 'forgetful' (neglectful) growers. **Malling Jet** flowers two weeks after Baldwin and also avoids most frost damage, but crops three weeks after Baldwin. **Ben More**, however, will flower three weeks after Baldwin, but crops a fortnight earlier than Malling Jet, and only seven days after Baldwin. For perhaps the earliest ripening crop the Dutch variety **Boscoop Giant** may be chosen. It bears only a moderate crop, but the berries are large and quite sweet. Flowering early, its susceptibility to frosts needs to be considered, as does the fact that it forms a large vigorously growing bush with a somewhat 'straggly' growth habit requiring plenty of space. **Ben Lomond** is a heavy yielding variety that flowers two weeks after Baldwin, yet can be harvested upto a week earlier. The berries are larger than many other varieties and though there may be fewer berries per bush, the yield in weight terms per bush, is often greater (upto 50% plus, greater). The berries freeze well and are good for juicing.

Blackcurrants

Flowering times of other varieties relative to 'Baldwin'



Cropping times of other varieties relative to 'Baldwin'



The main danger to the crop yield is damage to the flowers by late frosts, causing 'RUN OFF'

A short guide to growing Bush Fruit

Redcurrants, Whitecurrants, and Gooseberries

Much of what has already been said regarding Blackcurrants, is also applicable to red- and whitecurrants, and also to gooseberries. As with blackcurrants, these plants need open sunny sites with rich, free-draining though moisture retentive soil, having a pH of around 6.5. Heavy soil, prone to waterlogging must be avoided. A sunny or semi-shaded position should be chosen. Flowering and fruiting commences on wood that is one year old, i.e. shoots that grew this year will flower next year. Ripening occurs June-July. The plants are usually quite susceptible to a potash deficiency so should have added potash fertiliser to supplement an annual top-dressing of general fertiliser applied in late January / late February.

The major difference is that these plants exhibit a greater propensity, than blackcurrants, to form fruiting 'spurs', which are like short stubby 'branches' that bear flowers and subsequent fruit. These spurs remain productive even on much older wood. Thus the need to hard prune back to ground level to generate young replacement shoots, as in the case of blackcurrants, is avoided. As the branches remain productive for far longer, it is possible to train a much longer-lived branch structure into a variety of forms. It is still possible to grow redcurrants etc. as a multibranched stooled bush, but it is usually more convenient to grow the bushes on a single main 'leg', with any branching occurring higher up the stem. Thus a variety of forms may be trained, such as fans, espaliers, single, double or triple cordons, or half standards and standards, as well as the typical goblet shaped bush. These forms can be chosen to suit differing growing situations, as well as to provide an 'ornamental' element to the bush and make for ease of harvesting of the fruit. Thus a fan, or espalier, may be grown against a fence or wall, while upright cordons also take up less space than a bush, especially where growing room is at a premium. Half-standards and standards may be grown in tubs to provide ornamental structure as feature plants within the garden or on the patio, whilst still producing an edible crops. Even if ornamentation isn't particularly required, an open, goblet-shaped bush form arising from a single main stem will keep the bush healthier by allowing light and air into the structure, to help ripening of the fruit and making harvesting easier, and in the case of gooseberries, less hazardous!

As bought, most plants will be 1-2 year old bushes grown on a short leg. When planting do not plant them any more deeply than 1-2" below the level they were originally, as shown by the soil mark on bare-rooted plants, or the compost level on container-grown plants. Specially nursery-trained forms will be older, and considerably more expensive, and though taking longer to develop, young plants, or even rooted cuttings, trained to shape by yourself, will be vastly cheaper, as well as providing an added sense of accomplishment.

Propagation

Propagation is usually by means of well-ripened upright-growing disease-free hardwood cuttings taken in the dormant season, usually in September/October, though cuttings can be taken through until February if weather allows. As for blackcurrant cuttings, select the current year's growth, but about 15 inches long. The apical shoot tip need not be cut off, unless it is unripe and sappy. Make a straight cut below a bud at the base and remove all the buds (and gooseberry prickles) except the topmost 3-4. Insert the cuttings, 6" apart, into the soil with about 9" above soil level; make sure it doesn't dry out, but leave in position until the following autumn (Nov). They should then be well rooted and ready for lifting and replanting in their permanent growing position. Plant an inch or two lower in the ground than they were as cuttings and firm well in.

Although shoot-tip cuttings or layering can also be used for propagation it is rarely practised.

Planting distances

If to be grown as an open-centred bush, plant 5ft apart, in rows 6ft apart. Cordons may be planted 15" apart for singles, 30" for double cordons, and 45" for triple cordons. Row spacing for cordons should be 4ft.

A short guide to growing Bush Fruit

Pruning

Immediately upon planting a one year old bush, cut each branch back to four buds from the main stem above an outward-facing bud. On newly rooted cuttings where the apical shoot has continued to grow, take out the tip, so that side shoots are encouraged to grow. Leave about 6-9" of leg, free of shoots, rubbing off any buds or young shoots below that level. In the second winter cut out entirely any shoots that spoil the overall shape of the bush, especially any inward-growing or crossing branches. Shorten all the other branch leaders by a half of new growth, above an outward-facing bud. Prune weak shoots more severely, cutting off at least two-thirds of new growth.

In the third and fourth winter, leave some outward-growing laterals to grow into branches where there is room, cutting out the remainder and inward-growing laterals completely. The aim is to achieve a cup-shaped open-centred bush having 8-10 main branches on a 6-9" leg. Having thinned out the branch leaders and unwanted laterals then shorten the remaining branch leaders by a half during the third year, and by a quarter during the fourth year.

Thereafter prune back by about 1" yearly. As the oldest branches then become too long and unproductive progressively cut them right back and allow renewal growth to replace them, by selecting a strong young shoot lower down to develop.

To train as an upright cordon, insert a stout cane or an 8'x 2"x2" stakes in the soil as support. If using a cane, tie the shoot to the cane, and then the cane to straining wires stretched between posts for added support. Cut the topmost tip of the main leader shoot by about two-thirds and cut any side branches back to one bud. Select the topmost new shoot during the following summer and tie that in to the cane to become the new leader, before it becomes too lignified and hardened (about June). At the same time (about mid-/end June) shorten any new lateral growth back to four or five leaves, just above a leaf joint. The following winter, cut back the laterals to just one bud to force the production of fruiting spurs. Once the cordon has reached the desired height (usually 5-6ft.) cut any new leader growth back to four leaves in June, removing it entirely the following winter.



Redcurrant bushes grown as cordons before 'summer pruning' in June

A short guide to growing Bush Fruit



Redcurrant bushes grown as cordons after 'summer pruning' in June

If training as a half-standard or standard, start as though training a cordon, again supported by a stout cane or stake. As the main leader grows rub off the lower buds and shoots (including any spurs), but allowing the apical bud to remain intact. Once the extension growth on the main leader has reached the desired height (about 3ft for half-standard) cut the tip off the leader by about 6" and allow the topmost 6" remaining to branch and bush out, leaving the lower 2ft as bare stem by rubbing off any buds and side-shoots as they form. As the lower stem becomes older it becomes less and less likely to produce buds and side-shoots. Treat the topmost growing part as a bush, but shortening any branches, as required, to prevent it spreading out too widely. Trimming the top growth into the shape of a ball may look 'nice', but will result in a reduced, difficult-to-pick, harvest and give 'crowded' growth that is more susceptible to fungal attack. It is preferable to train into an open goblet-shaped form. For a 'standard' allow the main leader to grow taller before allowing the branched head to form. A tall standard will require a substantial stake to support it throughout its life.

Pests and Diseases

Redcurrants, whitecurrants and gooseberries are all susceptible to aphid attack, the former two can also be affected by leaf blister aphid. All are susceptible to mildew (American Gooseberry mildew) particularly (and obviously) gooseberries. The currants can contract Coral Spot fungus. This should be treated by cutting out and burning affected wood below the infection and spraying the plant with a preventative fungicide.

Gooseberries can be affected by Gooseberry sawfly in Spring, whose numerous voracious larvae (caterpillars) can strip a bush entirely of its leaves within 2-3 days, if left unchecked. Though this will probably not kill the bush, and regrowth will start almost immediately, the plant will have suffered a severe check in growth and subsequent cropping.

In winter and early spring, birds, mainly finches, will peck off buds. If that becomes a problem then net the bush. In June and July, birds, mainly blackbirds, will eat the ripening fruit, particularly redcurrants. Again net the bush before they strike.

A short guide to growing Bush Fruit



Harvesting

Red- and white currants ripen during June through to late July depending upon variety. The whole strig of fruit is usually removed intact, rather than picking individual berries.

Gooseberries are usually picked in two phases. The first picking can take place in June when the gooseberries are about the size of a large marble and still hard and not fully ripe.

A short guide to growing Bush Fruit

They should be used exclusively for cooking as they are still quite sharp to the taste. This should thin out the fruit on the branches so that the remaining unpicked berries are about 3" apart. These should then be allowed to swell, soften and ripen fully, when they may be picked for dessert purposes about 3-4 weeks later depending upon weather. During the time the fruit is swelling they should not go short of water as the skins will harden. Subsequent watering may then cause splitting.

Varieties

There is a smaller choice of varieties than for blackcurrants, probably because they are of lesser commercial importance, though there has been some renewed interest in recent years with the introduction of some good new varieties.

Redcurrant varieties include:

Jonkheer van Tets - an old Dutch variety very early cropping, vigorous grower with upright growth, ideal for cordon growing.

Laxton's No 1 - old variety, early season cropping, slightly spreading growth habit.

Red Lake - heavy cropper, maturing later, very long strigs.

Junifer - new variety, very early, heavy cropping.

Stanza - mid-season cropping, on late flowering bushes, so minimises risk from late frosts.

Rednose - heavy yielding mid season European variety, said to do well on damper soils.

Rovado - newer Dutch variety. Proving popular though cropping later in early August

Redstart - cropping even later than Rovado in mid- August.

Redpoll - latest introduction, extremely long strigs, late mid-season, vigorous grower, can be trained as cordon or fan where space is tight, but will need attention to regular pruning to keep a check on growth.

Whitecurrant varieties are generally slightly sweeter in flavour than redcurrants and include:

White Versailles - old variety giving an early heavy crop, good general purpose 'workhorse' variety.

White Dutch - spreading habit, good cropper

White Pearl - long strigs of large translucent pale yellow/white berries.

White Grape - old variety, cropping July, vigorous upright growth.

Blanca - new European variety with exceedingly heavy yields though probably the latest to crop in August.

Gooseberries have always enjoyed popularity, and have led to the formation of 'Gooseberry Societies' for growing and exhibiting the 'heaviest' gooseberry (measured in 'pennyweights') with fruits the size of eggs! The biggest drawback is their prickly nature and their susceptibility to gooseberry mildew, though both these faults have been reduced in newer introductions.

Greenfinch - new variety with greatly improved resistance to mildew and less spiny than most - greenish/yellow berries.

Invicta - new very heavy yielding variety with high resistance to mildew - green/white berries, very popular variety.

Early Sulphur - older variety, but early to ripen and can be eaten as dessert or used for jam, sulphur yellow berries

Rokula - German raised new red coloured variety, cropping earlier than Whinham's Industry, compact slightly drooping growth habit. High mildew resistance

Martlet - new introduction, but already likely to show improvement over Rokula

Careless - old variety that became a commercially grown standard variety, good early mid-season heavy cropper of white'ish berries that does well on even poorer soils - losing ground to Invicta.

Whinham's Industry - another older red variety, once very popular, can tolerate heavier soils

A short guide to growing Bush Fruit

Leveller - old mid-season variety with large yellow berries, good dessert and jam-making properties and still an exhibition variety. Does require good soil though and tends to have a lax spreading growth habit

Lancashire Lad - another good old favourite, heavy cropping with quite good mildew resistance, with good flavoured red fruits, needs good soil though.

Hino Red (Hinomaki Red) - New variety, popular in Europe - quite frost-hardy so suitable for colder areas.

Hino Yellow (Hinomaki Yellow) - sister variety to Hino Red - yellow fruit, frost hardy but more compact and spreading growth habit.

Pax - often advertised as the first spineless gooseberry, though it is neither first nor completely thornless, but an improvement on earlier attempts. It has Whinham's Industry in its lineage, hence the deep red fruits and excellent flavour. The spines actually aren't that frequent, being mainly restricted to new growth and soft in nature, so no need to forewarn the blood bank!

Lancer (Howard's Lancer) - older variety but large yellow/green smooth berries with excellent flavour, vigorous growth in all soils, mid- to late-season. Still an exhibition favourite.

Jubilee - an improved Careless bred by East Malling, improved everything!

Hybrid Berries.

Jostaberry - Dutch bred cross between a gooseberry and blackcurrant producing large (marble-sized) blackcurrant-like berries. Good mildew and gall mite (big bud) resistance. Very vigorous growth, doing well even on poorer soils. Grow as for redcurrant on a leg, or as cordons, needs firm discipline to keep in check. Impossible to fail with this.

Worcesterberry - gooseberry hybrid of American species *Ribes divaricatum*. Very vigorous growth habit; in fact, a bit of thug! Very thorny, good for deterring intruders, but not for deterring blackbirds, who just love this slightly acid, tangy marble-sized deep red fruit. For ease of picking, without excessive blood loss, grow as a cordon or a fan, and net it, as the blackbirds get up earlier than you!

A short guide to growing Bush Fruit

Blueberries (& Cranberries)

Blueberries (and Cranberries) are different from other bush fruits in a number of respects. Firstly, being ericaceous plants, they not only prefer an acid soil, they demand one, no higher than pH6.0 and preferably much lower. Any appreciable amount of lime in the soil could cause lime-induced chlorosis, indicated by pale yellow mottling of leaves.

They are north American in origin and are relatives of our native bilberry or whortleberry, but with much larger fruit. Their growth in popularity in recent years really stems from its promotion as a 'superfruit', with claims of 'miraculous' health-giving properties. In reality these are probably no more, or less, beneficial than blackcurrants, or any fruit, eaten as part of a balanced diet. They are also relatively slower growing than other bush fruits and can be slower to get established too, but their productive lifespan is much longer, said to be upto 50 years, though the weight of fruit produced per bush, per year, will fall below that of similar sized blackcurrant bushes. Blueberries ripen later than blackcurrants, the bulk of varieties ready to harvest during August, though one or two varieties can be had to ripen in late July, depending upon the weather. To be able to pick sufficient fruit at any one picking to supply a family of four, will require around 6 bushes, though berries will remain fresh for 7-10 days if kept chilled in a refrigerator. Blueberries don't ripen evenly, and the fruit ripens over a period of 2-3 weeks, so several pickings are needed. The fruit turns from green to blue, usually with a powdery grey/white bloom on the surface. It is not ripe enough for picking until 7-10 days have elapsed from the time the fruit first turns blue. It is possible to bulk up supplies from fewer bushes by more than one picking, and keeping cool in a refrigerator.

The leaves of the blueberry turn to shades of orange and red in the autumn, which can be used to effect as a decorative feature in the garden.

They require a sunny position, in moist, but not wet, acid soil, and are usually grown, like blackcurrants, as a 'stooled' bush. They should be planted an inch, or two, lower than the original depth, teasing out the roots, if container-grown, to assist establishment. They are fibrous rooted with the roots lying near the surface, so though surrounding weed removal is necessary to reduce competition, the surface soil should not be deeply disturbed. A top dressing of balanced lime-free fertiliser such as blood, fish and bone should be applied each spring followed by mulching with well-rotted manure or garden compost. Spent mushroom compost should not be used as it contains lime. They should never be allowed to go short of moisture, but should not allowed to become waterlogged. They need to be planted between 3-4ft apart. They can be grown in a container, using John Innes Ericaceous compost, or a mixture of peat-based ericaceous compost and soil (50:50), and preferably watered with collected rainwater. They are self-fertile to a limited extent, but best pollination and fruit bearing is achieved by having two or more plants, usually of different varieties, but similar flowering times, grouped together to allow cross-pollination. The flowers are upturned cup-shaped and range from white to shades of pink. They are mainly insect pollinated so the bushes need to be protected from strong winds as pollinating insects will not fly in windy conditions.

Pruning

Blueberries require little or no pruning for three years after planting, and winter pruned as necessary thereafter. The fruit is borne on the previous year's wood, and new basal growth needs to be promoted to replace shoots that have become too old, tall and straggly.

Depending upon how large the plant is, then each winter cut back down to the base, or a strong basal shoot, between 1-4 of the oldest shoots and snip off any weak spindly side growth (sprue). That's it!

Pests

The bush will require netting as protection from birds, particularly blackbirds. Failure to do this will mean loss of the bulk, or whole, of the crop.

A short guide to growing Bush Fruit

Varieties

Several newer varieties have been introduced in the recent past, many, if not all, claiming improvements over established varieties. They are usually more expensive to buy, but if you want try them out, do so. They certainly won't be less good.

Some established varieties are:

Bluetta - early ripening - late July/early August

Blue Crop - early/mid August

Berkely - early/mid August

Herbert - mid August

Heerma - slightly smaller fruit, but in heavy numbers, mid August

Jersey - late August

Goldtraube - late August

Cranberries are low growing sub-shrubs, with a spreading habit and rarely growing taller than 1ft high. They are evergreen, and can be used as a form of ground cover planting. They require a sunny position, planted in rich, but acid, moisture retentive soil. They need no pruning, other than trimming back any straggly untidy stems in early spring. The fruit is oval or round in shape and red to deep red in colour, depending upon variety. An annual feed of fish, blood and bone fertiliser will keep plants growing vigorously over many years. There are no major pests or diseases though the moist cool conditions underneath the top growth will be a haven for slugs and snails. The ripe fruit will probably require protection against birds, by erecting a light supporting structure and draping with netting.

Vaccinium oxycoccus – medium sized red fruits

Early Black – vigorous, very deep red fruits

Remember that the fruits are small and a lot of plants, or a very mature large one, will be required to provide a tumbler of cranberry juice, or enough to make a jar of jelly!