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Berry Your Garden This Year

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GARDEN NOTES

BERRY YOUR GARDEN THIS YEAR

By Dennis Hinkamp

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Like roses, most berries make you suffer the thorns if you want to enjoy the fruit.

“Although I may be in a minority, I put currants and gooseberries in this same group of tart fruits,” says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist. “Their fruit is pretty, somewhat edible, and with enough sweetener make great jams, jellies and syrups. Eating them fresh may be for the birds - literally.”

“I also have a problem with any fruit that surrounds itself with thorns,” he adds. Many of these plants seem to have an exaggerated ego. What do they think they are protecting? For example, take the well-armed gooseberry. The plant shields its fruit with spines a little sharper and longer than a javelin. Now, if the fruit actually tasted good, it might be worth the battle to retrieve the fruit. Instead, you come away maimed, with nothing to show for it but a small, green berry that still needs a couple of tons of sweetener just to make syrup.”

Currants and gooseberries not only produce edible fruit, but also are attractive plants, Goodspeed says. We even have a couple of native currants that bring beauty to our mountains and provide food for our wildlife. The golden currant and the western black currant, are nice plants that occasionally show up in home landscapes.

“There are about 100 different species of currants, but only two or three of them are actually cultivated for their berries,” he says. “The most common currants that are grown are red, white and black currants.”

The most popular red currant is probably the cherry currant, Goodspeed says. It is winter hardy and produces an excellent, large berry. Other varieties that are available include Red Lake, Redstart and Rovada. If you are looking for a white currant, try Blanka. A relatively newer variety is Pink Champagne. This currant has a translucent, pink fruit with excellent flavor.

If you don't mind fighting particularly thorny gooseberry plants, try growing either Poorman or Pixwell, he suggests. Both offer an abundance of large berries with good flavor, but also have an abundance of thorns. One variety, Oregon Champion, is said to be thornless, but has been known to surprise growers with an occasional spine, just to keep anyone who picks them humbled.

Before planting any of these varieties, incorporate as much organic material into the soil as possible, Goodspeed says. Once they are established, mulch them annually with some organic

material. They also prefer an area with good drainage. Leave plenty of space between each plant. Put them no closer than five feet apart. Both of these plants can reach a height of four to six feet, and sometimes more, if left unpruned. Water deeply, and fertilize each spring with an all-purpose fertilizer, as needed.

“I’m often asked what to plant in a part-shade location,” he says. “Currants and gooseberries are one of the few fruiting plants that actually do thrive in light shade. So, if you have such an area, this may be the answer. In fact, a southern exposure, or one that receives the hot afternoon sun, can actually weaken the plants, causing sunburn and creating other problems.”

Currant fruit is borne on side branches and mature stems (canes), Goodspeed says. Usually, the most productive canes are between two to four years old. As the stems get older, their production decreases. Prune out all of the older stems, opening up the middle, and allowing newer stems to grow up from the base of the plant.

Gooseberries are pruned and trained exactly like currants, he says. The difference between these two plants is that the currant fruit is borne in clusters, while gooseberry fruit grows individually along the canes.

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