How to Grow Gooseberries

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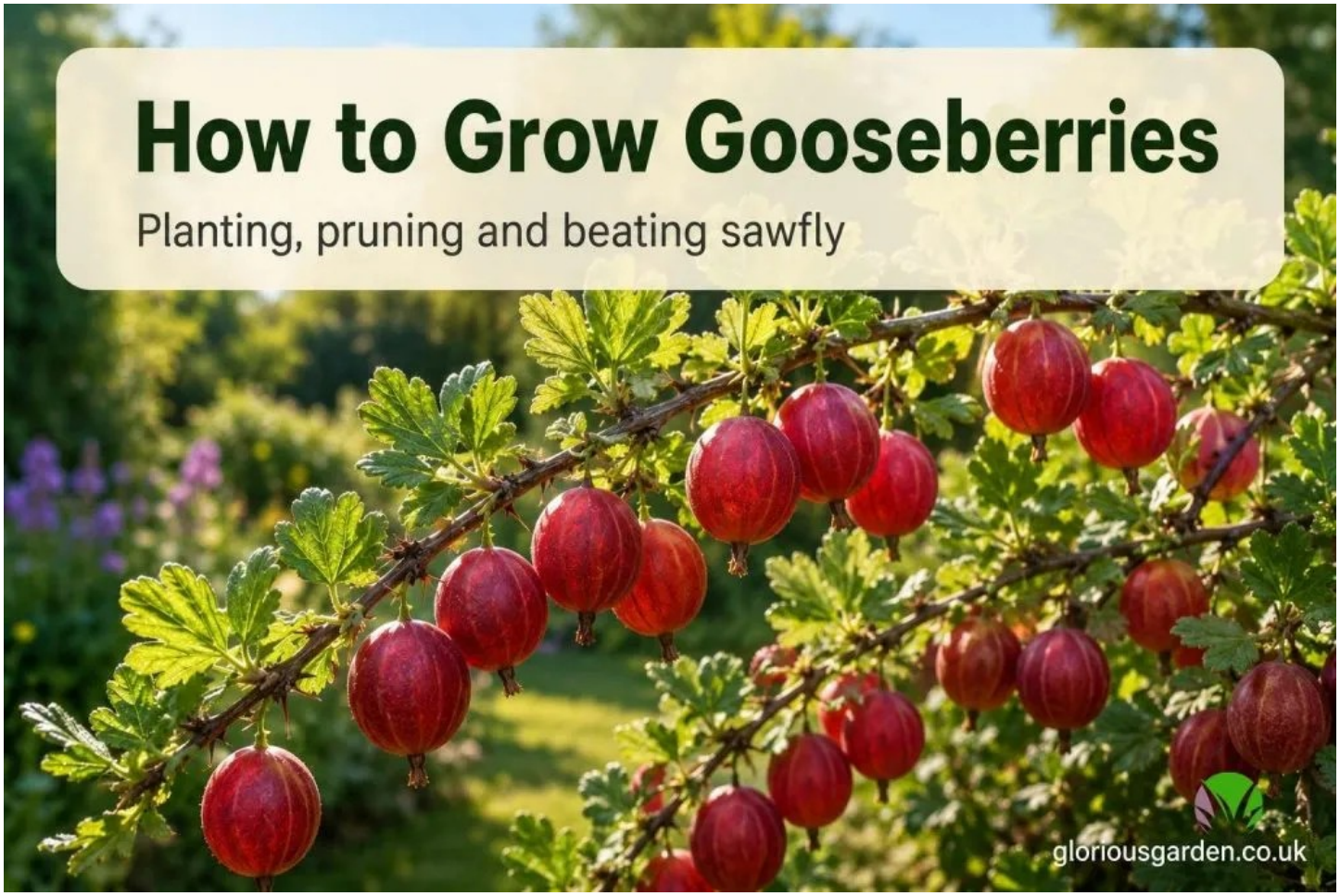

How to Grow Gooseberries in the UK

How to grow gooseberries in the UK, plant a bare-root bush between November and March, or a potted one at any time of year, in a sunny sheltered spot with moist but well-drained soil. Space bushes 1.2 to 1.5m apart, prune to an open goblet shape each winter, and watch for sawfly larvae from late April. Thin the fruit in June for cooking and let the rest ripen through July for eating fresh. One bush will crop reliably for ten to fifteen years, which makes it about the best value plant in the whole fruit garden.

The gooseberry bush at the end of my old Oxfordshire plot came with the house, and for the first two years I did precisely nothing to it beyond picking the fruit. Then one June I walked past and half the bush was a skeleton, every leaf stripped to the veins in what seemed like a weekend. That was my introduction to gooseberry sawfly, and it is the one thing standing between you and the easiest soft fruit you can grow. This guide covers choosing a variety, planting, the pruning that keeps a bush productive for a decade, and the sawfly routine that means yours never gets stripped the way mine did.

Why Gooseberries Are Worth a Corner of Any Garden

You almost never see gooseberries in a supermarket, and when you do they cost a fortune for a small punnet of underripe bullets. That alone is a reason to grow them: this is fruit you essentially cannot buy properly. A ripe dessert gooseberry, eaten soft and warm off the bush in July, tastes of grape and muscat and mild honey, and bears no resemblance to the sour green things sold for crumble. The bushes are hardy everywhere in the UK, happy in sun or light shade, untroubled by most soils, and crop for ten to fifteen years with an hour or two of care annually. Alongside rhubarb, they are the closest thing to guaranteed fruit British gardening offers.

Choosing a Gooseberry Variety: Cooking, Dessert or Both

Varieties split into culinary types, picked hard and tart for pies, jam and fools, and dessert types, left to ripen sweet for eating fresh, with a few doing both jobs. For a first bush I would plant Invicta, a heavy-cropping culinary variety with useful resistance to mildew, the disease most likely to bother a gooseberry. If you want fruit for eating straight off the bush, Hinnomaki Red ripens to a deep wine red and is genuinely sweet, and it looks handsome doing it. For a shady corner or heavy clay, the old Victorian variety Whinham’s Industry tolerates both better than anything modern.

Buy a two or three year old bush with a short clear stem and three to five main branches, because that shape becomes the goblet you will prune to later. Thompson and Morgan’s gooseberry bushes cover the varieties above, sold as potted plants year round and bare-root in the dormant season. One bush is enough to start with, since gooseberries are self-fertile and do not need a partner to set fruit.

When to Plant Gooseberries

Bare-root and dormant, planted between November and March, is the cheap and reliable way in.

The best window is November to March, using a bare-root bush planted while it is dormant. Bare-root plants are cheaper, establish quickly, and the winter rain settles them in with almost no watering from you. Potted bushes go in at any time of year, though a spring or autumn planting beats midsummer, when you would be chained to the watering can. The logic is identical to raspberry canes: dormant season planting is cheaper and easier, and the plant does most of the work.

Where to Plant Them and How to Prepare the Ground
Gooseberries fruit best in full sun, and dessert varieties need it to build their sugar, but they are one of the few fruits that crop respectably in light shade, which makes them useful for the awkward east-facing spots where nothing else fruits. Pick somewhere sheltered, because the branches are brittle and snap in wind once loaded with fruit. The soil wants to be moist but drained, with a bucket of well-rotted manure or compost worked into the planting area beforehand. If your ground is thin or tired, sorting that first is worth more than any variety choice, and improving your garden soil covers how.

Planting itself is ten minutes. Soak a bare-root bush in a bucket of water for an hour, dig a hole wide enough for the roots to spread, and set the plant at the same depth it grew at the nursery, visible as a soil mark on the stem. Firm it in, water well, and mulch generously, keeping the mulch clear of the stem. Space multiple bushes 1.2 to 1.5m apart. In a small garden, one bush in a 45cm pot of soil-based compost works perfectly well, the same container logic as blueberries, though a gooseberry is far less fussy about what goes in the pot.

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Pruning Gooseberries Without Overthinking It

Everything about gooseberry pruning reduces to one idea: keep the centre open.

Pruning frightens people off gooseberries, and it should not, because the whole job reduces to one idea: an open centre. You are aiming for a goblet, eight or ten main branches around a hollow middle, so light and air move through the bush. An open bush ripens fruit better, suffers far less mildew, gives sawfly fewer dense hiding places, and is far kinder to your hands at picking time, because gooseberry thorns are no joke and a congested bush is a hedgehog.

In winter, while the bush is bare, take out anything dead, crossing or growing into the centre, and shorten the main branches by about a quarter, cutting above an outward-facing bud. In late June, trim the current season’s soft side shoots back to about five leaves, which pushes energy into fruit rather than foliage. That is the entire routine, twenty minutes twice a year in thorn-proof gloves. The RHS pruning guide goes deeper into cordons and fans if you fancy training one against a fence, which is a lovely way to grow them in a tight space.

Gooseberry Sawfly: The One Problem That Really Matters

The culprit: pale green, black-spotted sawfly larvae can strip a bush to bare veins in days.

Sawfly is the reason gooseberry growers look haunted. The adult is a small, forgettable fly that lays eggs on the undersides of the lowest leaves in the middle of the bush, and the pale green, black-spotted larvae that hatch eat with astonishing speed. A big population can strip a bush to bare veins in days, usually while you are on holiday. The bush almost always survives, but a defoliated plant ripens little fruit that year, and there can be up to four generations between late April and September, so one missed wave breeds the next.

The defence is a routine, not a product. From late April, once a week, part the branches and check the undersides of the low central leaves, which is where the eggs are laid along the veins. Crush any eggs and pick off larvae the moment you see them; caught early, the whole infestation is a five-minute job. If the bush is too dense to search, spread an old sheet underneath and shake the branches, and the larvae drop out and show up against the pale cloth. Fine insect mesh such as butterfly netting draped over the bush from April makes it much harder for adults to reach the leaves and lay in the first place, and your open goblet pruning helps too, since the females prefer dense growth. For a bad recurring problem there is a nematode drench sold for fruit and veg pests, watered on in cool damp weather when larvae are actually present. The RHS sawfly page covers identification if you want to know exactly what you are squashing.

Birds, Mildew and the Other Problems

Once the fruit colours, blackbirds and pigeons will find it, and they do not thin the crop politely, they take the lot. A frame of bird netting over the bush from the moment berries start to ripen solves it completely, exactly as it does for strawberries. Fit it tight so birds cannot get tangled, and take it off after the last picking.

The other classic trouble is American gooseberry mildew, a white powdery coating on shoot tips and fruit that turns felty brown. Resistant varieties like Invicta mostly sidestep it, and an open-pruned bush in a sunny spot rarely suffers badly. If it appears, cut out the worst affected tips and go easy on nitrogen-rich feeds, because soft lush growth is exactly what mildew wants. A spring mulch of compost and a scatter of high-potash feed is all the feeding a gooseberry needs.

Harvesting: Thin in June, Feast in July

June thinnings are the cooking crop; what stays on the bush doubles in size for July.

Do you need two gooseberry bushes to get fruit?
No. Gooseberries are self-fertile, so a single bush sets a full crop on its own. A second bush is only worth adding for more fruit or a second variety, such as one culinary and one dessert type.

What is eating my gooseberry leaves?
Almost certainly gooseberry sawfly larvae, pale green caterpillar-like grubs with black spots that can strip a bush to bare veins in days. Check the undersides of low central leaves weekly from late April, pick off any larvae, and the problem stays small. The bush usually survives even a full stripping but crops poorly that year..

A Sensible Place to Start
Keep it simple. This winter, buy one bare-root Invicta, plant it in a sunny sheltered spot with a bucket of compost worked in, and mulch it well. Next year, learn the two twenty-minute prunes and start the weekly sawfly check from late April. Thin the fruit in June, net it, and in July eat a properly ripe gooseberry standing next to the bush. From then on you will get a decade of fruit for less work than almost anything else in the garden, and you will wonder, as I did, why nobody told you sooner.

How to Contact the Editor

If you have comments or you know I have given wrong advice then please contact me by email at

info@yeovil-allotments-association.co.uk

If you have something to contribute or have a say on allotment life, then please use my email to send your contributions.

I am going to process the magazine issue once a month, so if there are comments you would like to make they can be answered in future editions.

I would like to add that most of the articles are taken off the web and some well known gardening and allotments magazines have been read in the making of our magazine content.

We also have our own website at :

www.yeovil-allotments-association.co.uk

where you can find this magazine as well as a catalogue

Happy Allotmenteering and best wishes,

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