

NON-TREE FRUIT, Ideal for any garden

It seems to me that there are many reasons why almost any Organic garden should include non-tree fruit. I include in this category; bush fruit, cane-fruit, vine fruit and herbaceous perennial fruit. For growing outside in the British climate the fruit in each category would include:-

Bush; Black Current, Red Current, White current, Gooseberry, Worcesterberry, and Blue berry

Cane; Raspberry, Blackberry, Tayberry, and Loganberry

Vine; Grapes,

Perennial; Strawberries, Alpine Strawberries and Rhubarb (though technically not a fruit).

I have grown many of the above for over 20 years and I believe that they represent the most productive part of my gardening. For best results they do involve some work in addition to picking but are far less work than most vegetables. In addition to this they are all perennial although do not take so long to start bearing fruit as the tree fruit. On the other hand some are not as long lived as trees so need replanting occasionally. The following notes may be of help to those with little or no experience. I have never grown grapes as I think we are too far north to expect success outside but I can comment on all the others in the list.

FITTING FRUIT INTO THE GARDEN

Some of the fruit plants and bushes are also decorative and do not need any form of management that might detract from the more decorative parts of the garden. For example alpine strawberries are ideal as border plants in a flowerbed and they do not seem to need netting against birds or mulching whereas ordinary strawberries whilst looking OK need netting and a straw or shavings mulch so are perhaps better in rows in a separate bed.

Gooseberry and blueberry bushes are very decorative although there is the need to net against birds if the crop is to be left on the bush until ripe.

Black and red current bushes are perhaps less attractive so would be put in a less prominent position.

Raspberries are best grown in a way that they can be tied up. Planting them in rows with wires to tie them to is the usual way but individual plants with a wigwam of canes to support them is an attractive alternative.

The other cane fruit are all rambling canes and can be grown over a hedge although this can cause some difficulty with harvesting and pruning so I also grow these on wires also.

Rhubarb needs an open patch of ground and is often grown on an odd corner of the vegetable garden.

VARIETIES

With most types of fruit there are a range of varieties to choose from. These vary from each other with time, of ripening, yield of fruit, flavour of fruit, length of season and disease resistance.

As a general rule the higher yielding varieties have been bred for commercial production systems which tend to use a high level of chemical inputs; they also often have less flavour. For a organic system it is best to choose varieties with good flavour and natural resistance to diseases. It is also useful to have a range of varieties which ripen at different times to give a longer season.

Early varieties of rhubarb give a picking without forcing in March but I think the later varieties which are not ready until late April are a better flavour. All varieties can be picked until late June. I grow several varieties.

The very soft fruit; strawberries and raspberries and the rambling cane fruits need almost daily pickings in the season if fruit is not to be lost. Unfortunately these fruit ripen during the holiday season and you may lose some of the crop whilst you are on holiday

The harder soft fruit; gooseberries, worcesterberries, and currants are less critical as to the exact time of harvesting and are often picked slightly under-ripe for cooking.

Growing a range of varieties to give a longer season is always a sensible strategy.

We usually freeze all our fruit, except what we want to eat immediately and then use them in pies etc or to make jam as we have time throughout the year.

MANAGEMENT

Some aspects of management have already been touched on but I will systematically go through the different types describing my management systems.

I apply a moderate dressing of seaweed fertilizer in spring to all fruit./

Bush; Black Currents need different management from the other bush fruit. Black currents bear their fruit on last year's new growth, it is therefore necessary to prune out all the branches that have borne this year's fruit immediately after harvest to encourage the new growth that will bear next year's fruit. I grow black currents about five feet between bushes and cut the grass between hand pulling anything that grows six inches round the base and mulching in Spring.

Red Current, white current, gooseberry, worcesterberry, and blue berry all bear fruit on old wood and so pruning is limited to the removal of very old branches, shortening new shoots and improving the shape of the bush for example if you are growing in grass the lower branches can be removed to enable the mower to get closer.

Gooseberries and worcesterberries tend to sprawl near the ground making mowing and harvesting and weeding difficult. For this reason I train mine as a hedge using a wooden frame to keep the branches up.

Cane fruit all bear fruit on last year's new canes which grow up from the base.

Raspberries have straight canes with few thorns, the plants spread sideways by sending up new canes from creeping roots. I grow raspberries in rows planting new canes about a foot apart, these fill out into a continuous row in a couple of years. Any sideways spread is checked by mowing between the rows. Each row has a stake at each end with two wires stretched between. During the winter the old dead canes are removed and the new ones thinned to leave the most vigorous, these are tied to the wires to stop the fruiting branches from sagging and sometimes breaking. The weeds are removed along the rows and mulch put down and the grass mown between the rows.

Blackberry, tayberry, and loganberry are all rambling canes with varying amounts of thorns. They bear fruit on last year's new canes which grow up from the base of the plant. They do not spread with creeping roots like

raspberries. New plants will form as any canes that grow along the ground will produce roots. Left to their own devices a thicket will form in a few years. Unless you want more plants it is best to prevent canes from rooting by encouraging them to grow over a hedge or along wires.

There are a number of methods of training rambling canes along wires; most try to prevent the new canes from growing through the fruiting canes to make pruning easier. The version I use is rather wasteful of space and so would not be the best for a small garden. Each plant is grown with clear space on either side (6ft minimum in the case of blackberries and 4ft

min. for the others). Four wires are stretched along this space the lowest at about 18 inches and the highest about 5 or 6 ft. Last year's growth is trained along the four wires on one side of the plant, extra canes are cut out. This is the part of the plant for this year's crop. New canes grow as the summer progresses four of these are trained along the four wires on the other side of the plant, extra canes are cut out. This enables you to build a strong framework for next year's fruit without them getting in the way of the fruiting canes. During the winter all the canes that have fruited are cut out at ground level so clearing one side for the following year's new canes.

Perennial; As was mentioned earlier ordinary strawberries need a dry mulch when the flowers are out so that the fruit does not lay on the soil, they also need netting against birds as soon as the fruit shows colour. For this reason I grow strawberries in their own bed about 4 ft wide and a path on each side. There are two rows and new plants are spaced at about 9 inches. Weeds are removed throughout the year. After fruiting strawberries produce runners (baby plants on the end of long shoots) these should be removed and either used to plant a new bed or discarded. Strawberries also benefit from the removal of all leaves just after harvest; I use a strimmer or shears.

Alpine strawberries are easier but the crop is smaller although spread over a longer period; June til Autumn frosts. I grow them as a border plant in the flower bed, keep them free from weeds, pick the fruit and that's all. They remain productive for about four years. New plants are grown from seed.

Rhubarb needs little management. A dressing of compost and organic fertilizer each winter and removal of persistent weeds is about all.

Harvesting can start as soon as the stems are a usable size and can continue until at least the end of June.

Care should be taken not to over pick and it is important to see that at the end of the season sufficient leaves are left to ensure the roots will overwinter with enough strength to ensure a good crop next year. If next year is less productive then over picking has taken place.

IN CONCLUSION

Non tree fruit can be grown in even the smallest garden and although some of the methods I have described suit a garden with plenty of space I hope that there is sufficient information for the reader to feel confident to start growing at least one type however small their plot is.

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