



Soft FRUIT

The end of the Summer is the prime time for soft fruits. They're easy enough to grow, even in small spaces and are some of the most rewarding crops. Learn how with *Gillian Carson's* advice.

If you think that growing your own fruit is for people with more space and more time than you, think again. You don't need to have an orchard full of apples and pears to enjoy the freshness and taste of all sorts of home-grown fruit.

One of the best types of fruit to grow if you are tight on space is soft fruit. It's usually small and can be grown on bushes that you can keep short by pruning them every year. The benefits are obvious – fresh fruit from your backdoor every day during the Summer and so tasty too, because you can pick

it at the peak of ripeness.

Growing your own soft fruit has other advantages too – it enables you to tap into the rhythm of the fruit-growing season. The first fruit to ripen is the strawberry, closely followed by red currant, white currant, blackcurrant, gooseberries, raspberries and finally, blackberries late in the season.

It becomes clear how certain partnerships developed – apple and blackberry, gooseberry and elderflower – because they are harvested at the same time. >

Author

Gillian Carson is a kitchen gardener and blogs at My Tiny Plot, www.mytinyplot.co.uk



Photo: Gillian Carson

“It’s because soft fruit is so fragile that it’s at its absolutely best when it’s ripened in the garden.”

they really need very little care and minimum pruning. Many people don’t have soil acidic enough to grow Blueberries out in the open garden and so many opt for growing them in pots and containers. Once established, the bush will crop heavily every year.

Blueberries are partially self-fertile, which means that they will set fruit when there is only one bush, but it’s safer to plant two or even three bushes to ensure the crop is good.

Blackberries

Anyone who has seen a sprawling, gigantic blackberry bush in a hedgerow knows that blackberries need no encouragement to grow and will quickly take over a small spot. You’ll find yourself taming rather than pruning.

That said, if you don’t have access to wild blackberries, growing your own can be an option. Choose a sheltered spot, away from wind. They will tolerate part-shade but not full-shade. Prune in the same way as Summer-fruiting raspberries – cut down this year’s fruiting branches and tie in new growth for next year.

Hybrid Berries

Hybrids berries are usually a cross between a blackberry and something else. For example, a tayberry is a hybrid raspberry-blackberry, and a boysenberry is a hybrid loganberry-blackberry. Some, like the wineberry, are species in their own right.

Because hybrids take their beginnings from blackberries, they are generally treated in the same way as blackberries. Hybrids are a little fussier when it comes to soil – they like a more rich, fertile soil. They are also a little more delicate than blackberries and require a little more wind protection. However, once established, they can be as vigorous as most other blackberries.

FRAGILE AND SO PERFECT

It’s because soft fruit is so fragile that it is at its absolute best when grown in the garden and left to ripen on the plant. Commercial growers cannot let their fruit ripen because it will spoil in transit, so you won’t taste anything like a home-grown strawberry bought from the store. An even better reason to grow it yourself.

LINKS

Pomona Fruits www.pomonafruits.co.uk,
R V Roger www.rvroger.co.uk,
Ken Muir www.kenmuir.co.uk,
RHS Plant Shop www.rhsplants.co.uk,
Soft Fruit Recipes www.seasonalberries.co.uk ●

Do Strawberries Need Straw?

Good question! Strawberries take their name from the fact that they were traditionally grown on straw, but what is the benefit in using this?

The answer is that it keeps the strawberries out of the mud and so ensures that they stay cleaner. This in turn keeps them dry and off the wet ground, which discourages slugs. Slugs and snails also don’t like the roughness of the straw and won’t cross it to reach the berries.

There are down sides to using straw. On windy allotments and exposed gardens it can blow away. Also the straw can actually harbour slugs as they like to shelter under it. Alternatives include growing strawberries through black plastic sheeting or raising your strawberries off the ground using a wire or plastic platform. All do the same job and work quite effectively.

BUYING FRUIT BUSHES AND CANES

If you are just getting started with soft fruit, buy a range of fruit to see what you like to eat and then add to your collection in following years. A good selection to start with is some mid-season strawberry plants, redcurrant, blackcurrant, gooseberry, some Summer-fruiting raspberry canes and one blackberry bush (these can sprawl and take over the garden if not kept pruned).

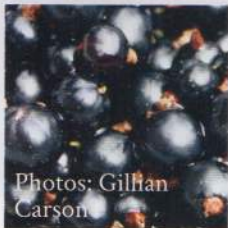
If all goes well in the first year you can graduate to early, mid-season and late strawberries, whitecurrants, blueberries (these need to be planted in ericaceous or acid soil) and the plethora of hybrid berries available such as tayberry, boysenberry, loganberry, dewberry and wineberry.

You can buy soft fruit as a bare-rooted plant or pot-grown plant. Although it will say on the label that pot-grown fruit can be planted anytime of year, it's best to plant them in Autumn, after they have gone dormant. November is ideal. Choose a day when the weather is not too cold or wet and ground is not frozen.

HOW TO GROW

Strawberries

Few fruits can rival the luscious strawberry. Its aroma and sweet taste make it the most popular soft fruit we grow here in the UK. Traditionally the season is short, covering a few weeks in June and July. However, new varieties that include late-cropping types and those that will crop once then crop again later in the year mean that, with a bit of manoeuvring, you can have strawberries all Summer long. Strawberries are relatively easy



Photos: Gillian Carson

to grow. They require no pruning and are easily propagated from runners. So, if you have a friend that grows strawberries, ask them if they can pot up some of the runners for you at the end of the Summer. Strawberries are not fussy about soil type. So long as it is free-draining, strawberries will grow in most gardens. What they do need, as with most fruit, is sun. The sunnier the spot the better.

Gooseberries

Gooseberries are an old-fashioned fruit that has fallen from favour in recent years. Its tart,



THE TASTIEST STRAWBERRY

This Summer, Which? Gardening did a trial of 23 different varieties of strawberry. The trial lasted two years and they taste-tested them with over 1100 people, in a bid to find the tastiest strawberry. This epic trial saw 460 plants being planted through permeable plastic mulch (to keep the weeds down and keep the fruit clean) and a huge fruit cage being erected above them to keep the birds at bay. After tramping around RHS Hampton Court Flower Show, RHS Garden Wisley and consulting their panel of expert testers, this Summer, the verdict was in!

www.which.co.uk/gardening

Best Early Strawberry

Joint winners - Darlisette and Sallybright

Best Mid-Season Strawberry

Sonata

Best Late-Season Strawberry

Malwina



tangy flavour and the fact that you need to add lots of sugar to gooseberry dishes, puts some people off. Not many people know that you can grow sweeter, dessert varieties that you can pick and eat straight from the bush.

Gooseberries ideally like to be planted in a slightly acid soil. They dislike being waterlogged and will grow more vigorously and give a heavier yield if the soil is free-draining, with manure added to it. Gooseberries need plenty of water, so water regularly if the weather is dry. They will also benefit from a feed of potash in February or even March

Red & White Currants

Prune red and white currants in the same way as gooseberries. Red currants tend to be more acidic in taste, while white currants (that are actually pale yellow) tend to be sweeter.

Blackcurrants

Blackcurrants fruit on one-year old wood (the wood that grew last season), therefore attention to pruning is essential to ensure a good crop. In fact, some experts recommend harvesting by cutting out an entire branch that has fruit on it. Any branches that are older than three years will not produce fruit and should be cut out completely. These will be the darker-coloured branches. Cut the branch to one bud above ground level to encourage new growth.

Raspberries

Raspberries come in two types, Summer-fruiting and Autumn-fruiting. Harvest Summer-fruiting fruit from July and Autumn-fruiting canes from August until the first frosts. If you have room for both types, you can be eating raspberries from mid Summer to late Autumn!

You'll need some supports to grow raspberries, especially Summer-fruiting ones. For a reasonable crop, aim for a row of canes 2 – 3 metres long.

Remember to keep Autumn and Summer fruiting types separate, as they need different pruning techniques. Summer-fruiting types fruit on last year's wood, so at the end of the fruiting season, cut the fruited canes to the ground and tie in the new growth. This will fruit the following year. Autumn raspberries fruit on new wood (ie, this year's growth) so cut them down to the ground in Feb and the new sprouts will fruit that very same year.

Raspberries like water but if they become waterlogged, the roots are likely to rot. If you have a heavy, clay soil, consider planting them in plank-bordered, raised beds.

Blueberries

Blueberries love acidic soil. Give them that and