

IN THE GARDEN

raspberry fields FOREVER

If you have a little space to spare, berries and currants
make a most rewarding backyard crop.

BY RICHARD RIX



It was a sad occasion a few years back to make the annual pilgrimage to Silver Stream Farms, just north of the city off Leslie Street, only to find that the berry fields had been plowed under for a housing development. Many other such fields will doubtless fall victim to urban sprawl,

so if you wish to savour the delight of picking your own berries and currants without having to roam too far afield, you may have to cultivate your own. Fortunately, that's not hard to do, even in a modest-size city garden.

Strawberries are the most popular gar-

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den berry, yet probably don't deserve to be. They send out runners all over the place so are difficult to control, are extremely susceptible to pest damage, and demand premium sunny locations. To compound these problems, just as your crop peaks in late spring, the supermarkets and fruit stores are awash in local commercially grown berries that generally taste as good. It would not surprise me to learn that the number of people who strip out strawberry beds each year from their gardens is about the same as the number of people who plant new ones. They're just not worth the trouble.

Raspberries are a much better choice for a crop. They demand little care, are easy to grow, have few pests and will take some shade yet still bear a decent crop, though of course they will yield more fruit if cosseted. Being difficult to pack and ship, the most delectable raspberries rarely find their way into the local stores, which makes it even more worthwhile to grow your own.

Of the several hundreds of raspberry species growing in North America, about ten are mainly responsible for bringing us today's main garden cultivars, including the reds, yellows, blacks and purples. Of the reds, the Taylor, Latham and Viking varieties perform well in the Toronto area, as well as the tart Ontario-bred Madawaska, and they will guarantee several weeks' good picking around the height of summer. The yellows are a mutation of the reds and tend to be regarded as inferior, but if you can cultivate the Fallgold variety you will likely find it the best flavoured of all, plus it has the advantage of bearing fruit in summer and again in fall. The blacks and purples tend to mature later than the reds

and are not usually as sweet, though some have the advantage of being everbearers.

Raspberries may be grown quite densely along a narrow strip. They need little pruning, except to cut out the canes once they have finished bearing fruit for the season. This is a disease-prevention exercise, and next year's fruit will grow on this year's new, green canes. Do be sure to cut out the canes as soon as fruiting is over, for it is easier to recognize the old from the new then, rather than later. In the spring, you may wish to thin the canes to four or five from each root system and to monitor the spread of suckers.

Raspberries really appreciate a yearly application of manure or compost, which should be dug in gently around the root system, as well as shallow cultivation three or four times a year. Be on guard for mildew and cut out any affected canes immediately. That's why if you do have to water your raspberries during periods of drought, it's best to water the soil direct.

Gooseberries deliver another nice crop, though watch out for their thorns. They will tolerate more shade than most berries and have a long fruiting season. Though not as sweet and succulent as many other berries, they are wonderful in pies and jams. A good place to plant a gooseberry bush is by the side of a walkway (though not too close, because of the thorns). Then, as you walk by on those hot days of summer, you can reach in and help yourself to a refreshing cluster. You should not plant gooseberries near white pines, because they nurture blister rust, which is deadly to the trees.

Tayberries are twice the size of most raspberries and are both richer and juicier, but their brambles can render parts of your

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Yellow Fallgold raspberries may be the best flavoured of all.

garden inaccessible. They are well worth the effort if you have some spare space in the sun, however. Blueberries are more of a challenge to grow, and you will have to provide them with a porous, acidic, moist soil to succeed with them. Mulberries hold little appeal to us grownups, but seem to delight children and birds, so you may wish to consider planting an ornamental tree. (The source of the mulberry “bush,” as celebrated in the nursery rhyme, seems to be a mystery.)

Finally, let’s not forget the currants, both as desserts and for preserves. Redcurrants are extremely easy to grow and ask little more than a sunny spot in order to deliver a bountiful harvest. As well, the fruit

hangs on the bush for a long time and may be picked over a period of many weeks. Blackcurrants, while a more desirable fruit, are more difficult and very susceptible to powdery mildew. As with gooseberries, some of the best currants grow on spurs from older canes, so do allow some old growth to go on for years without being cut out. 🍷

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