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Small Fruits

For the West

By D. W. BUCHANAN, St. Charles, Man.

First Article CURRANTS

The currant is the best known and most largely grown of our small fruits. It is adapted to a wide variety of soils and a considerable variation in climate. While largely grown the currant is frequently shamefully neglected as regards attention and cultivation. The bushes are frequently planted along a fence where they receive no cultivation and remain for years until the grass sod around them becomes as tough as the native prairie. Worms are allowed to devour the foliage, thus injuring the crop of the following year. Pruning is quite neglected. That the currant will produce fruit at all under such circumstances, is a wonder. While often so neglected, there is no fruit that will respond to generous treatment more readily than the currant, by an increased yield of finer fruit. If the fruit is worth growing at all, it should be given reasonably good cultivation. If the reader has a lot of old bushes which have been so neglected, do not start in to try and improve them. It will be much more profitable to obtain new plants. The old, neglected bushes would not likely ever make good plants. Two year plants are the best for the beginner to start with.

Currants are said to be a very healthful fruit. We knew of one man who claimed to have been cured of indigestion by a liberal use of red currants. Used in the form of that rural delicacy known as green currant pie, we should not regard them as very healthful, but we can quite believe much that is said in favor of currants from a health point of view, when fresh, fully ripe fruit is used. The sweeter varieties of currants, such as White Grape, when fully ripe, are certainly both delicious and healthful, when eaten fresh, with sugar and cream. The juice of any of the currants makes a delightful drink, which should be extremely healthful. The thrifty housewife will understand how to preserve either the whole fruit or the juice for use at any season of the year. For jelly, or for marketing, the fruit should be gathered before it is too ripe, that is, while some of the berries on the ends of the bunches are still somewhat green. For home canning or table use ripe fruit is best.

Planting and Cultivation

As already stated, the currant will grow in almost any kind of land, but rich, well drained land is desirable for best results. If a heavy crop of fine fruit is wanted, rich soil and abundant cultivation should be given. Starting with two year old plants, they should be planted in rows five to six feet apart each way. They are sometimes planted closer, but we prefer the longer distance. Do not plant along a walk or fence, but in the open garden, where the ground can be given horse cultivation at least one way between the rows. If planted on a large scale they should be so arranged that horse cultivation can be given between the rows both ways. The land should be prepared for this or any other fruits by thorough cultivation and deep plowing. Land that is in good shape for ordinary garden crops should do. Planting should be done either early in the spring or in the fall. If in the fall, we prefer rather early fall, so the plants will become somewhat established before winter. If the weather is unseasonably warm, or the ground very dry, it would be better to wait for more favorable conditions. We have planted currants in the fall even after the ground had begun to freeze with good results, but if the ground is in good condition, toward the close of September or early October is a better time. The same rules should be observed in fall planting as in spring planting, except that in the fall plants should be well banked up and small plants like currants may be entirely covered. Once planted, the main thing is cultivation, which should be done with a one-horse cultivator between the rows, not once or twice during the growing season, but frequently. This cultivation should be kept up each and every year as long as the plants are desired to produce fruit. A currant plantation, well treated, will give good results for many years.

In the East twenty to thirty years is allowed for the currant. Cultivation should be started early in the spring, early cultivation being the most effective. A light plow may sometimes be used to advantage for the first cultivation in the spring. Towards picking season cultivation may be suspended to avoid injury or shaking off of the fruit, but at least one or two good cultivations should be given, starting soon after the fruit is gathered. This will assist the plants to retain foliage and improve the fruit prospect for the next year.

Pruning

In our severe climate there is sometimes a tendency to overdo the pruning of trees and plants, especially on the part of those who come from a moister and milder climate. The currant, however, will be improved by considerable pruning, which, like all other pruning, should be done systematically and with a definite object in view. Toward the close of the growing season, or early in the spring is the best time to prune. Many varieties of currants send up a number of new shoots each year. The pruning should consist in removing all but three or four of the strongest of these new shoots each year. At the same time some of the oldest branches should be cut out close to the ground. By following this plan the bush will be entirely renewed every few years, always remembering that three or four year old wood usually will produce the most fruit. The plants should, therefore, be a few years old before the old wood is cut out, unless, of course, some of the old wood should be damaged by disease, insects, or from some other cause, in which case it would usually be better removed.

These directions as to pruning are based on the theory that the plants are growing on the bush plan. Sometimes currants are grown on a single stem, like a small tree. This plan is entirely unsuited to this country. Our heavy winds may break off the single stem, and the plant is gone. When grown in bush form, the snow is retained about the roots much better during winter, which gives protection to the roots, and also assists in retaining moisture in spring and summer. The work of the currant borer is alone a sufficient reason against growing on the single stem plan. The stem is often so damaged by these insects as to destroy the branch entirely. If the currant is on a single stem, the entire plant is lost, while if there are several stems, only one may be lost.

Mulching and Protection

This question of mulching is one upon which we have been asked a great many questions. Many people seem to think that they can keep weeds down and save cultivation by mulching. The mulch has its place and is sometimes useful and beneficial, but as a substitute for cultivation, or for keeping down weeds, we regard it as very unsatisfactory. Strong weeds will push through almost any thickness of mulch that it would be safe to use. Cultivation, without the mulch, in our climate, is far better than a mulch without cultivation. Frequent surface cultivation provides a dust or soil mulch, the loose surface soil acting as a mulch for the soil underneath. The soil is more easily cultivated than when covered with litter, and there is less tendency to grow weeds. Manure may be scattered about between the rows, preferably in the fall, and worked into the soil in the spring, with good results for the crop. Wood ashes are also valuable.

The hardy varieties of currants will not require much in the way of winter protection. In severe of exposed locations, the best protection would be a covering of brush, to gather and hold the snow. If the brush is cut in the summer it will retain the leaves and in this form makes a more desirable cover.

Insect Pests

The insect most frequently found upon the currant is the common currant worm. The mature insect, in the form of a fly, not unlike the house fly, lays her eggs on the under side of the leaf, in the spring. The young worms, soon after hatching, at once attack the foliage and where numerous soon strip the bushes. They are about three quarters of an inch long when fully grown and of a greenish yellow color. A second brood sometimes appears late in the summer. The currant worm is very easily destroyed. Powdered hellebore may be applied either in a dry form, mixed with flour, about equal parts

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