

Growing small-fruit in Newfoundland

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Newfoundland is a challenging area to grow the larger fruiting trees like pears, apples and plums. Our short growing season, late spring frost and cool summer temperatures work against us. However, there are a surprising number of successful smaller fruiting plants we can grow...strawberries, currants, gooseberries, raspberries, etc. There are few points to keep in mind if you plan on trying to grow these small fruit selections.

Site Selection:

Fruiting plants need full sun. While many will tolerate part-shade, the best fruiting will occur in full sun. The site should also be reasonably sheltered; not because the plants are tender, as the selections to be discussed are quite hardy. However, best fruit set occurs when pollinator activity is high and the more sheltered the site, the better the insect activity around the bushes. Avoid low-lying pockets which may result in late spring frosts which may damage the flower buds. Southern to western slopes is ideal.

Planting:

The ideal time to plant is late April-mid-May before the fruit plants leaf; this is critical if moving them bare-root or transplanting from one area of the garden to another. Container-grown plants can be planted anytime in the growing season but again the earlier, the better so they have a chance to establish themselves before fall. Fall-transplanting is often recommended in books but not recommended in Newfoundland. The soil should be reasonably fertile with added compost and peat (not just peat alone as it does not have any nutritive value). The soil depth should be at least 12" as fruiting shrubs have a relatively large root system. Raised beds are often employed if the existing ground is too rocky to dig to the proper depth. Spread the roots evenly in the planting hole if moving them bare-root, otherwise, loosen the root-ball if they are container grown. Addition of bonemeal in the planting hole is beneficial.

Fertilizing:

Fruiting plants require fertilizers that encourage flowers, hence avoid fertilizers with a high first number (the nitrogen). A ratio of 1-2-2 is ideal (eg. 6-12-12) generally applied at 50 grams/m²; scratch into top 2-3" of soil. Apply just as the first leaves appear.

Winter Care:

In rural areas, hares and moose may browse the bark of some fruiting shrubs. Wrapping in burlap may help combat this. Fruit shrubs may be tied together in late fall with soft twine to help prevent splaying of the shrubs by heavy snow.

Strawberries

Two types of strawberries are available: June-bearing (July in NL) and everbearing. June-bearing is the best type locally as everbearing still only produces a single crop in our short-growing season. Plant them in early spring as soon as ground can be worked. Plants often purchased bare-root; store damp in refrigerator if not ready for immediate planting.

Space plants 24" apart in rows 3-4 feet wide; allow runners to fill in the spaces (this form of cultivation is called "matted rows"). Mix 6-12-12 fertilizer at 60 gm/m² prior to planting. Plant so that the roots are positioned downwards and spread them a little; the midpoint of the crown should be level with the soil surface. In the first season, do not allow any flowers to develop fruit as this will drain the plants.

Water regularly until established; established plants require regular watering from flowering until ripening to maximum fruit size. If mulching around plants with straw or sawdust, apply ammonium nitrate fertilizer at 15 gm/m² in late August.

Throughout the summer, plants will produce runners. These should be positioned so that new plants will be 6" apart. Generally, a given plant will produce good fruit set for 3 years. Plants older than 3 years should be replaced with yearling runners.

Winter protection beneficial if snow is not reliable; straw or evergreen boughs can be used but do not apply until the ground is frozen.

Contrary to the norm in Newfoundland of selecting early-maturing varieties, with strawberries, it is best to select late varieties. These will ripen in July. Early-fruiting varieties may bloom so early that their flowers are damaged by late spring frosts. Recommended cultivars include: Sparkle, Bounty, Kent and Micmac.

Raspberries and blackberries

Raspberry and blackberry have similar growing requirements; raspberries are generally upright while blackberries are more arching to trailing. Both have biennial stems; unbranched canes are produced one year which then branch and fruit in the second year. The fruiting cane then dies but plants send up new canes each year; raspberries and blackberries sucker so new canes may arise some distance from the parent; purple and black raspberries do not sucker.

Due to disease issues, avoid growing them where potato or strawberries were previously grown.

Cane fruits are best planted in rows with canes tied to fences to make cultivation/picking easier. Place rows 2 m apart; within rows, space red raspberries 60 cm apart while the others are spaced 80 cm apart. Plant new plants about 2" deeper than they were previously grown. Newly transplanted plants should be hard-pruned to 8" to encourage new canes. Fertilize new transplants with 6-12-12 at 50 gm per m of row. Fertilize established plants at bud break; use 6-12-12 at 120 gm per metre of row.

Do not allow them to produce fruit in their first season. Immediately prune any harvested canes to make room for new canes; trim back any winter die-back of canes in spring. Winter protection is generally not needed in our area.

Recommended raspberry cultivars include 'Boyne', 'Festival' and 'Nova'; the best purple raspberry is 'Royalty'; best black raspberries are 'Bristol', 'Jewel' and 'Huron' the best blackberry cultivars are 'Chester Thornless' and 'Illini Hardy'.

Currants and Gooseberries

Currants and gooseberries prefer cool, moist soil (but not soggy). They will tolerate part-shade better than other small fruit-bearing shrubs but will produce more fruit in full sun. Again, early spring planting is preferable over fall planting. Apply 10-10-10 fertilizer at 60 gm/m² prior to planting new bushes. Established bushes should be given 200 gm per bush; apply at bud-break.

Currants and gooseberries are self-pollinating so one plant will produce fruit. If growing several plants space gooseberries and red and white currants 1 m apart; space black currants 1.2 apart. If planted in rows, space rows 2 m apart. Plant them a little deeper than they were growing in their pots. Immediately after planting, prune back all stems to 6"; do not allow any fruit to form in the first year.

Water regularly if rain is lacking; this is especially important from flowering time until harvest. 0 cm of the plants.

Currants and gooseberries fruit best on 2 and 3 year old stems; any stems older than 3 years should be removed in early spring; ideally plants should never have more than 12 stems at any time.

Best red currant cultivars are 'Red Lake', 'Stanza' and 'Cascade'. Best white currant cultivars are 'White Grape' and 'White Pearl'. Best black currant cultivars are 'Ben Alder', 'Ben Sarek' and 'Titania'. Avoid 'Consort' as it is prone to diseases. Suggested gooseberry cultivars include 'Pixwell', 'Clark', 'Fredonia', 'Hinnimaki' and 'Invicta' (note that gooseberries have spines).

Elderberries

A novelty fruit but highly suitable in our climate. Plant shrubs 2 m apart; they can reach 3-4 m tall. Best to plant two different cultivars for maximum fruit set. Prune out all stems older than 5 years as those stems will have reduced fruit production. Good selections include 'Johns', 'York', 'Adams' and 'Victoria'. Elderberry borer beetle (large navy-blue and orange beetle) can be a problem, especially if golden elders are growing nearby.

Saskatoons

They are another novelty fruit for our region, but are very popular on the Prairies. They also grow as large as elderberries so require some space. Little pruning is required. Essentially they are a type of serviceberry or chuckley-pear, but the true Saskatoon (*Amelanchier alnifolia*) is a heavier fruit producer than our native species.