GOOSEBERRIES, RED, WHITE & PINK CURRANTS

The gooseberry is the first fruit of the season. The fruit should be thinned in late May and the thinnings used for cooking. The remainder should be left to swell near to full size and then used for pies, jamming and freezing. To appreciate a gooseberry as a fine dessert fruit a proportion should be left to ripen fully when they are sweet and richly flavoured. The requirements of gooseberries are similar to those of red, white and pink currants and these two crops should be grouped together in any garden plan. Varieties of gooseberries differ widely in their performance depending on local soil conditions, for example the variety 'Whinham's Industry' does well on heavy soils which are generally unsatisfactory for gooseberries. Chalky, sandy and gravelly soils in particular require plentiful dressings of farmyard manure or garden compost before and after planting; they are usually more tolerant of alkaline conditions than most fruits.

Closely related to the gooseberry, red currants have a markedly different flavour and use. Redcurrants produce insignificant flowers followed by long strings of shiny berries, with a sharp flavour. High in vitamin C these attractive berries can be used together with raspberries and blackcurrants to make a traditional Summer Pudding, or made into a flavoursome jelly to accompany roast lamb.

White currants are a member of the genus 'ribes' and are slightly smaller but sweeter than then redcurrants. They will grow to between 1-1.5m (3-5ft) tall and should be spaced 1.2m (4ft) apart.

Not as commonly available and sweeter than their red relations, pink currants can be eaten straight from the plant, are delicious in desserts and make the most wonderful jams and jellies because of their high pectin level.

TYPES OF PLANT

Gooseberries, red white and pink currants can all be grown as a bush, stooled-bush, half-standard or upright cordon.

A bush with a leg should have a leg which is at least 20cm (8in) long with three or more equally spaced branches each 30cm (12in) in length. It should have at least six main roots 15cm (6in) or more long.

Bushes without a leg are called stool bushes and like a blackcurrant, their branches arise directly from the root system. The bush should have two to five shoots each over 30cm (12in) in length.

Half-standard forms (where the main stem length is approximately 60-90cm [2-3ft] in length) are now becoming very popular. They have several advantages over conventional low bush forms. They are more attractive looking and since they bear their fruit well above ground level, they are easier to manage and pick. They also take up less ground space, since the area beneath the bush can be utilised by low growing annuals. This is clearly an important consideration in a small garden.

Cordons should have a clear stem of 10-15cm (4-6in) and above that they should have plenty of side shoots.

Half-standard Gooseberry

PLANTING DISTANCES

Bush and half-standard forms should be planted 1.5-1.8m (5-6ft) between rows and 1.2-1.5m (4-5ft) between the plants. Invicta should be planted at the wider distances.

Cordons should be spaced 30-37cm (12-15in) apart for gooseberries and 37-45cm (15-18in) apart for redcurrants.

PLANTING

Bushes grown on a leg should be carefully examined for dormant buds and small white shoots. These should be rubbed out to stop them from growing into unwanted suckers later on. Planting holes should be dug to a depth so that no more than one third of the stem is covered with soil. Any roots on the upper two thirds of the leg should be cut off. Stool bushes should be planted more deeply so that the bases of the shoots are at soil level.

Cordons should be planted and secured to a 1.5 or 1.8m (5 or 6ft) cane which should be secured to horizontal wires at 60cm (2ft) and 1.35m (4ft 6in).

SUCKER CONTROL

Gooseberry and red and white currant bushes produce suckers throughout their lives. They should not be cut off but pulled off the stem or roots in June or July whilst they are still soft.

PRUNING

BUSH & HALF-STANDARD

The primary objectives are to grow a vase shaped bush which allows light and air to penetrate around all the branches to discourage disease infections and make spraying and picking easier. Following planting or at bud burst, whichever is the later, any branch that does not form part of this vase shape should be cut right out of the bush. The remaining branches should be cut back to a third of their original length to left and right facing buds (see fig.1).

This treatment should be followed each year to increase the number of branches in the main framework of the bush and continued until the bush has occupied its allocated space (see fig.2). At this stage the leading shoots that extend the main branches should be pruned back to half their length to downward facing buds for upright varieties and upward facing buds for drooping varieties. All lateral shoots on the main branches should be summer pruned to half their length at the end of June and further pruned back to two or three buds each winter. Strong shoots that grow into the centre of a bush in competition with the main branches or in any other unwanted place should be cut out from June onwards.

GOOSEBERRIES, RED, WHITE & PINK CURRANTS

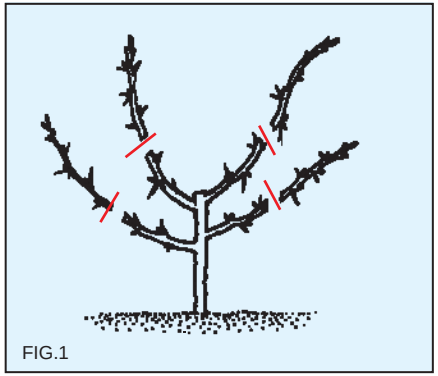
FIG.1

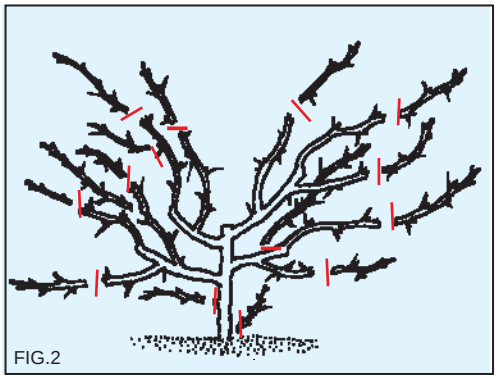
FIG.2

STOOLED BUSH

Stooled bushes should be pruned in a similar way to blackcurrants. After planting, cut back each shoot to two buds. In the years following, cut out all thin shoots and those that are likely to droop onto the ground. Then cut out to the base of the bush one third of the remaining shoots so that those left are equally spaced out. Any tips of shoots that are infected with mildew should be cut off and burned.

CORDONS

Cordons should be pruned in the summer and winter. In June the young side shoots should be pruned to five leaves. The leading shoot should be tied to the cane during the summer (see fig.3). In the dormant season (November-March) the side shoots should be pruned back to one or two buds. The leading shoot should be shortened by one third of the new growth each winter until it has reached the desired height. In following years the leader should be stopped at five leaves in June and pruned back to one or two buds in the winter (see fig.4).

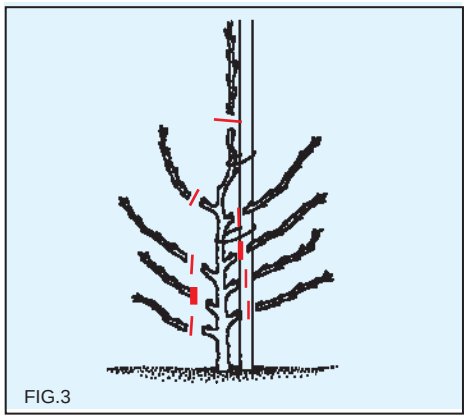
FIG.3

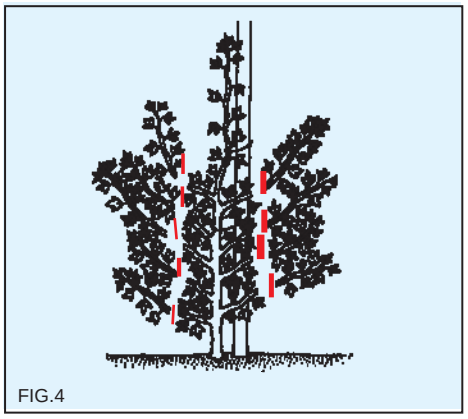
FIG.4

MANURING

To newly planted bushes in March, apply in a circle 60cm (24in) diameter around each bush:

10g (¼oz) Nitro-Chalk (calcium ammonium nitrate)
and 15g (½oz) sulphate of potash.

If by the middle of June extension growth is less than 22cm (9in) long, give a further application of 10g (¼oz) of Nitro-Chalk. In the two years following, apply similar amounts of fertilizer to each m^2 (yd^2) 90cm (3ft) round each bush.

When the bushes are fully grown and are cropping heavily, the rates of application should be increased to:

35g/m^2 (1¼oz/yd^2) Nitro-Chalk (calcium ammonium nitrate)
and 15g/m^2 (½oz/yd^2) sulphate of potash.

Every fifth year apply:

70g/m^2 (2½oz/yd^2) superphosphate.

Alternatively, a compound fertilizer may be used after planting and annually thereafter, following the manufacturer's recommendations. The Ken Muir 'Fruit Tree, Cane, Vine and Bush Feed' is ideal for this.