



soft fruit



what is it?

It's fruit that grows on anything smaller than a tree – so you can easily grow it in gardens and on balconies. Soft fruit is generally very juicy and has a thin skin, so it's softer than apples and pears and more fragile than oranges. Because of this, soft fruit doesn't store for long, so needs to be eaten soon after picking, or preserved as jams, jellies, cordials, or dried or frozen.

Most soft fruit grows on bushes – redcurrants, blackcurrants, gooseberries, blueberries etc. Raspberries grow on stick-like 'canes' rather than bushes. Some soft fruit grows on vines and climbers (grapes, passion fruit) and one type of berry grows on small, long-lived, very invasive creeping plants – hurrah for strawberries!

what are the benefits?

Growing soft fruit growing is less work than veg, which usually need to be raised from seed every year, whereas fruit bushes and plants live for many years and need relatively little care. Soft fruit is full of vitamins and nutrients. The chemicals that produce the rich colours of berries are thought to help prevent disease, possibly helping to reduce cancer risk.

Despite being easy to grow, soft fruit is expensive to buy, because picking usually has to be done by hand, and it has a very short shelf life. Soft fruit is probably the most expensive type of fruit or veg in the shops. A 300g punnet of raspberries or redcurrants often costs several pounds, even at the height of the season.

Having soft fruit in your garden or on your balcony means that you can pick it fresh every morning to add to your muesli or porridge (or lunch box), and home-grown strawberries are usually so much tastier than commercially grown ones.



Strawberries grow so abundantly that you can easily run out of containers when picking them.



Blackcurrants contain iron, potassium, manganese and several times your daily vitamin C requirement in one 100g serving.

what can I do?

Soft fruit will grow fairly well in partial shade. Planting directly into the ground is the best option, as it cuts down on feeding and watering, but most grow well in containers. Strawberries can be grown in pots and window boxes, and fruit bushes will grow in containers the size of large buckets. Raspberries will grow in tubs as long as there is drainage. If using containers, always make sure there are drainage holes in the bottom.

When planting into soil, add some compost or well-rotted manure. For bushes, bonemeal is helpful but not essential. For containers, soil-based compost such as John Innes no.3 is better than multipurpose compost, or make your own mix of 50:50 compost and topsoil. When growing in containers, don't just fill them with garden soil, and never ever buy peat-based composts. There are peat-free composts available in most garden centres.

In most of the UK, the soil is unsuitable for blueberries, because they are lime-hating or 'ericaceous' - but they can be grown in containers, with ericaceous (lime free) compost.

Spring or autumn are the best times to plant or transplant soft fruit. Get plants from friends or neighbours, or your local Freegle / Freecycle or permaculture group. Otherwise use your local independent garden centre.

Strawberries produce several new plants on runners each year, so people with strawberries will often be glad to give you some runners. Pot them up and keep them well watered in a shady spot for a few weeks to get established. If all your plants are the same variety, you'll have fruit for 3-4 weeks each year. Different varieties crop from June-September, and some new varieties claim to produce berries all summer.



A healthy, delicious breakfast of muesli with freshly-picked berries.

Raspberry canes also spread fast so can often be obtained for free from friends. Burying a vertical barrier around the bed can be a good idea, and mowing will also stop them spreading.

Rhubarb is not actually a fruit – we eat the stems – but people often think of it as the first soft fruit of the season. Ready to pick from about April, it fills a gap before berries appear in June. It won't grow well in a container, but due to its huge leaves, it tolerates shade. The best way to obtain a plant is from someone whose rhubarb has grown too big. In autumn, cut off some root from a donor's plant. Dig manure or compost into the hole, feed it each year with compost or manure in late winter, and keep it well-watered, especially in the year after transplanting. Small plants can be bought in pots from nurseries and garden centres, but these take a few years to grow to a useful size.

Currant and gooseberry bushes grow easily from cuttings. Cut 25cm twigs in the autumn and push them halfway into well-drained soil or compost. Protect them with cloches, fleece on sticks etc. In spring the cuttings will burst into life. Transplant or pot them up the following autumn when their root systems have grown. To save work, you could just push your cutting sticks into the ground where you want the bushes to eventually grow, but put 2 or 3 in each spot and thin them out later. It's quicker to obtain bushes that are a year or two old. They'll usually begin to fruit in their second or third year. Feed them with compost or well-rotted manure around their roots each winter, and once the

bushes are 1.5m high, prune them so they're open in the centre. Prune after harvest, not before. Redcurrants don't like much pruning, but blackcurrants can be pruned hard. Gooseberry bushes are best shaped so they have a clear vertical stem before bushing out.

Weeds will compete with bushes and reduce the crop. Mulch with cardboard or newspaper, topped with grass clippings or pulled-up weeds. You can also plant strawberries around bushes for a productive ground cover. Leave space around them so that you can feed them with compost or manure each winter. Wood ash also makes a good fertilizer for soft fruit, so long as you've been burning clean firewood, rather than old scrapwood which may contain preservative chemicals.

Allow 1.5m between currant bushes. While the bushes are young you can use the empty space between them for other crops, e.g. onions.

Use a fruit cage if you like, but they can collapse in heavy snow, and you should take the mesh off in winter to allow birds to eat pests. With no fruit cage, in some areas birds will be a problem and in others they won't. You'll maybe only need to cover your redcurrant bushes from flowering until harvest. You can cover bushes with old net curtains, or plastic fruit cage netting (peg it to the ground with string and tent pegs). Redcurrants can be picked all summer long. Blackcurrants and gooseberries don't 'keep' on the bushes and have to be picked as soon as they're ripe. Mature currant and gooseberry bushes can produce 5kg of fruit, so one redcurrant, one blackcurrant, and one gooseberry bush will be plenty. 10-20 raspberry canes or strawberry plants is also usually enough. Add 1-2 blueberry bushes in tubs, and your family will be self-sufficient in soft fruit.

Soft fruit grows well with neglect, so if you're not likely to feed / prune at the right times, it's still worth it. There's nothing to compare with bringing home your own strawberries from the allotment, or wandering out to the balcony on a summer's morning to pick berries for your bowl of muesli!

resources

- see lowimpact.org/soft_fruit for more info, courses, step-by-step guides & books, inc.:
- Roger Yepsen, *Berries*
- Stella Cubison, *Organic Fruit Production*
- Lesley Young, *Success with Soft Fruits*
- allotment-garden.org - how to grow soft fruits

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