Growing Blackcurrants in the Home Garden

Introduction

Blackcurrants belong to the genus Ribes which is in the Grossulariaceae order. There are approximately 150 species of Ribes, mainly distributed in northern regions of Europe and North America. The main commercially grown species of blackcurrant is Ribes nigrum. More recently there have been crosses between Ribes nigrum cultivars and other species. Cultivated since the middle of the sixteenth century, blackcurrants are commercially grown throughout northern Europe and Scandinavia, in New Zealand and to a small extent in Tasmania, Chile and North America. They have been grown in New Zealand since the arrival of European settlers in the 1800’s and have been grown in extensive commercial plantings since the late 1970’s.

Blackcurrants are a rich source of Vitamin C. Their dark colour results from high levels of anthocyanins that contribute to very high anti-oxidant levels. They are primarily used for drinks but increasingly used in jam, bakery products, confectionary and as a dairy food flavouring. The plants may live for 50 years, but commercially they are now often replaced after 10-15 years. The bushes are extremely hardy and have a high resistance to cold and to changes of temperature. They are amongst the easiest of fruiting plants to grow and will produce up to 3 kg of fruit per bush.

Varieties to grow

The best varieties for New Zealand home garden situations are Ben Rua or Sefton. Both these varieties have been selected locally for optimum fruiting performance. Sefton is an early variety that is pleasant to eat fresh but is also subject to attack by birds. Ben Rua is a small productive bush producing fruit with typical blackcurrant flavour.

Site Requirements

Blackcurrants have a high winter chilling requirement. This means that in many North Island areas they fail to crop well, but will fruit in most South Island places. Ideally, the site should be free from frosts after flowering begins which is usually in October. While frost damage can occur prior to this, blackcurrants are quite resistant to frosts at pre flower growth stages.

The best soil for blackcurrants is a deep well-drained fertile loam of good moisture-holding capacity. While they may tolerate a wide range of soil types, very light soils are difficult to manage. Soils of high fertility and those with high organic matter content are preferred. Adding compost at planting time and as a mulch around plants is beneficial.
Propagation
Blackcurrants propagate readily from hardwood cuttings. These should be taken after the leaves have fallen from the previous season’s growth and before sap starts moving in spring. They are best planted direct into the soil and should be planted as soon as possible after being removed from the parent bush. Cuttings should be 15-20 cm long.

Spacing
Plants can be spaced as close as 30cm between cuttings or up to 80cm apart. In each case, plants will fill the space available. An individual bush may occupy up to 1.5m in diameter at maturity.

Fertilisers
Blackcurrants are especially demanding of nitrogen and potassium. They dislike very acid conditions and soil pH should not be allowed to drop below 6.0. If the soil is naturally fertile and compost has been added, they require little additional fertiliser. One to two handfuls (about 40g) of a 12% Nitrogen compound fertiliser may be beneficial to maintain growth and cropping performance. This should be applied in late spring and a small supplement may be beneficial when applied in February when the flowers are initiated in the buds of new wood.

Watering
Blackcurrants are not very tolerant of dry conditions. To get good and regular cropping performance, plants should have adequate water available. This is especially important in autumn when flowers are being initiated.

Pruning
Regular pruning helps maintain consistent cropping. Removal of one or two of the oldest branches at the base is all that is usually required. Removal of any dead material and low branches touching the soil is also desirable. This should be done on an annual basis during winter.

Pests and Diseases
There are a range of pest and disease issues that can affect bushes, but in a home garden situation, it is usually possible to tolerate all of these without spraying and still get a good crop. Newer varieties are attractive to birds and netting may be necessary. Two species of aphids that attack the lettuce family can cause problems to new blackcurrant growth in spring. These usually migrate back to lettuces in early summer. Currant clearwing is a pest that burrows out the centre pith of canes. Low levels of this pest can be tolerated without affecting cropping performance.

Fig. 1: Ladybirds cleaning up aphids.
Fig. 2: Currant Clearwig burrowing out centre pith