

Growing Blackcurrants in Scotland – David Gallacher

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There is perhaps no fruit more synonymous with the Scottish garden than the blackcurrant. Resilient, prolific, and packed with more Vitamin C than an orange, these glossy dark gems thrive in the cool, damp summers of the north. Whether you're in a sheltered city plot in Edinburgh or a windswept croft in the Hebrides, the blackcurrant is a reliable ally.

Description

- Latin Name: *Ribes nigrum*
- Renaming: No, the name has remained stable for centuries.
- Height x Spread: Typically 1.5m x 1.5m, though some modern compact varieties stay smaller.
- Flowering Months: April to May (small, bell-shaped green-pink flowers).
- All Year Interest: Primarily spring (bright green foliage), summer (ripening fruit), and autumn (yellow leaf tint). Winter offers a structural skeleton of woody stems.
- Toxicity: Non-toxic to humans; the berries are a "superfood." However, they can cause mild stomach upset in some pets if consumed in very large quantities.
- Growth Habit: A multi-stemmed, deciduous shrub that produces fruit most heavily on wood that is one to two years old.

Habitat & Growing Conditions

Blackcurrants are "woodland edge" plants. They love sun to ripen the fruit and increase sugar content, but they are remarkably tolerant of partial shade.

- Soil: They prefer heavy, moisture-retentive soils. Scotland's clay-leaning soils are often ideal, provided they aren't waterlogged.
- Shelter: While hardy, cold spring winds can blast the blossoms, reducing your harvest. A sheltered spot is best.

How to Grow & Ongoing Care

Planting

Plant between late autumn and early spring. Unlike most shrubs, blackcurrants should be planted 5cm deeper than they were in their nursery pot. This encourages "basal growth"—new stems shooting up from below the soil line. Companion Plants: Plant with chives or garlic at the base to help deter mites and aphids.

Ongoing Care

- Feeding: They are hungry plants. Apply a high-potassium mulch (like well-rotted manure or compost) every March.
- Watering: Essential during dry spells in June and July while the fruit is swelling.

Hardiness

- RHS Rating: H6 (Hardy down to -20°C). They are perfectly suited to the Scottish climate and actually require a "chilling period" in winter to set fruit properly.

Pruning

Pruning Summary (The "One-Third" Rule)

Prune in winter when the plant is dormant.

- Year 1-2: Remove any weak or low-growing branches.
- Established plants: Remove about one-third of the oldest (darkest/blackest) wood right down to the base. This encourages the light-brown, younger wood which produces the best fruit.

Pruning in Detail

Pruning is the difference between a tangled, unproductive thicket and a vigorous bush laden with fruit.

In Scotland, where the growing season can be shorter, correct pruning ensures the plant's energy is directed into ripening this year's berries rather than maintaining old, tired wood.

The In-Depth Pruning Guide

Blackcurrants fruit most heavily on one-year-old wood (stems grown the previous summer). They also fruit on two-year-old wood, but the berries are smaller. Wood older than three years becomes "blind" and produces almost nothing.

When to Prune

The best time is mid-winter (December to February) when the plant is fully dormant and you can clearly see the structure of the branches without leaves.

The Three-Step Method: "The Rule of Thirds"

- The Low and the Lazy: Snip off any branches that are hanging low or touching the ground. These will produce dirty fruit and provide a ladder for slugs.
- The Dead and the Damaged: Remove any crossing branches that are rubbing against each other, as these create wounds where fungal diseases (like coral spot) can enter.
- The Renewal (The 1/3 Rule): Look at the colour of the wood.
- Light Tan/Grey: This is new wood (Keep this!).
- Dark Brown: Two-year-old wood (Keep most of this).
- Black/Craggy: This is old wood.

Cut one-third of these oldest, blackest stems right down to the ground. This stimulates the "basal buds" (at the very bottom of the plant) to shoot up fresh, vigorous stems for the following year.

Pruning a Newly Planted Bush

If you have just planted a "bare-root" bush in winter, be brave: cut every single stem back to one or two buds above the soil line. It feels heart-breaking, but it forces the plant to build a massive root system and a multi-stemmed base, which is essential for a long-lived, productive bush.

Propagation

They are incredibly easy to grow from hardwood cuttings. In late autumn, snip a healthy 20cm shoot of the current year's growth and stick it halfway into the ground. By next year, it will have rooted.

Challenges: Pests & Diseases

It can be frustrating when your hard work doesn't result in a bumper crop.

Birds: Netting is almost essential in July, or the local blackbirds will harvest the crop before you do!

In the Scottish climate, most other issues are caused by either the unpredictable spring weather or a few specific pests that love the damp conditions.

Here is a quick-reference guide to diagnosing and fixing the most common blackcurrant woes.

Symptom	Likely Cause	The Fix
Swollen, rounded buds that never open.	Big Bud Mite	Pick off and burn the "big buds" in early spring. If the whole bush is affected, it may need to be replaced with a resistant variety like Ben Hope.
Fruit drops off before ripening.	"Run-off" (Stress)	Usually caused by a cold snap during flowering or a lack of water in June. Ensure the bush is sheltered and water deeply during dry spells.
Leaves have a yellow "mosaic" or vein pattern. Reversion Virus	Reversion Virus	This is serious and spread by mites. The plant will stop fruiting properly. There is no cure; dig it up and burn it to protect other bushes.
White powdery coating on leaves/stems.	Powdery Mildew	Often due to poor air circulation or dry roots. Prune to open up the centre of the bush and mulch well to retain moisture.
Leaves turn yellow and drop in mid-summer. Nutrient Deficiency or Drought	Nutrient Deficiency or Drought	Blackcurrants are hungry! If it's not drought, they likely need a high-nitrogen feed or more organic mulch.
Clusters of tiny green/pink insects on tips.	Aphids (Greenfly)	Usually aesthetic, but they can stunt growth. Blast them off with a garden hose or encourage ladybirds into the garden.

The Scottish Blackcurrant: A Seasonal Maintenance Calendar

In Scotland, the growing season is often compressed, with a later start and an earlier autumn than in the south. This calendar is tailored to the specific timing of the Scottish climate to ensure your bushes remain productive and healthy.

Winter (December – February)

The Deep Prune: This is the most important task. On a frost-free day, remove one-third of the oldest, darkest wood. This "renews" the plant.

Planting & Moving: This is the ideal time to plant new bare-root "Ben" varieties or move existing bushes while they are dormant.

Hardwood Cuttings: Take 20cm snips of new growth and "heel" them into a nursery bed to create new plants for free.

Spring (March – May)

Feeding: In March, apply a thick mulch of well-rotted manure or garden compost. Add a handful of high-potassium fertilizer (like organic poultry manure pellets) around the base.

The "Big Bud" Check: Inspect branches for abnormally swollen, rounded buds (Big Bud Mite). Pick them off and burn them or put them in the bin—do not compost them.

Frost Protection: If a late May frost is forecast while the "Ben" varieties are in flower, throw some fleece over the bushes overnight to protect the delicate blossom.

Summer (June – August)

Watering: June is often a dry month in Scotland. Ensure the roots stay moist while the green berries are swelling; otherwise, the plant may "drop" its fruit to save itself.

Netting: By early July, the berries will begin to turn from green to deep purple. Cover your bushes with bird netting now, or the local wildlife will feast before you.

The Harvest: Depending on your region, the harvest usually falls between mid-July and mid-August. Pick the whole "strig" (the bunch) rather than individual berries to keep them fresh.

Autumn (September – November)

Clean Up: Clear away fallen leaves from the base of the plant to prevent fungal spores (like leaf spot) from overwintering in the soil.

Weeding: Give the base a final weed. Blackcurrants have shallow roots, so hand-weed rather than using a hoe to avoid root damage.

Pot Maintenance: If growing in containers, raise them onto "pot feet" to prevent waterlogging during the heavy Scottish winter rains.

A Quick Tip for the Islands & Highlands

If you are in a particularly exposed or coastal area, consider a temporary windbreak (like fine plastic mesh) during the flowering window in May. Even though the plants are hardy, salt-laden winds can "burn" the flowers, leading to a poor crop.

Best Varieties for Scotland

When growing in Scotland, look for the "Ben" series.

Bred at the James Hutton Institute in Dundee, these varieties were specifically designed to thrive in the Scottish climate and flower later to avoid late frosts.

Ben Lomond - The classic Scottish choice; heavy cropper and very hardy.

Ben Sarek - Compact habit, perfect for smaller gardens or windy spots.

Ben Hope - High resistance to Big Bud Mite and mildew.

Ben Connan - Exceptionally large berries and very high yields.

To name a few many others available

Best Varieties for Scottish Regions

1. The All-Rounder: 'Ben Lomond'

- Best for: Most Scottish gardens.
- Why: It has a late flowering habit, which helps it escape the late Highland frosts. It has a compact, upright habit and is very hardy.
- Flavour: Excellent, classic tartness; perfect for jams.

2. The Heavyweight: 'Ben Hope'

- Best for: Gardens prone to pests.
- Why: This is the first variety with high resistance to Big Bud Mite and Mildew. It is a very vigorous grower and reaches about 1.5m quickly.
- Flavour: Very high quality; a favorite for commercial juice production.

3. The Small Garden Choice: 'Ben Sarek'

- Best for: Wind-swept gardens, islands, or small plots.
- Why: It is naturally "dwarf," rarely exceeding 1m in height. Its branches are sturdy and less likely to snap in a Gale Force 8.
- Fruit: Enormous berries for such a small bush.

4. The Early Bird: 'Ben Connan'

- Best for: The milder West Coast and the Borders.
- Why: It produces massive fruit and has a very long harvest period. It's slightly earlier than Ben Lomond, which is great if you want to extend your "jam-making season."

5. The Sweet Treat: 'Ebony'

- Best for: Eating fresh.
- Why: While not a "Ben" variety, it is exceptionally hardy. It is unique because it is sweet enough to eat straight from the bush without your face scrunching up!

Regional Suitability Table

Region	Recommended Variety	Reason
Highlands & Islands	Ben Sarek	Low profile resists high winds; extremely hardy.
Aberdeenshire / NE	Ben Lomond	Late flowering avoids the "haar" and late frosts.
Central Belt / West	Ben Connan	Thrives in the higher rainfall and milder winters.
Southern Uplands	Ben Hope	High vigour to cope with poorer, upland soils.

Three Tips for Success in the North

1. The "Hungry Plant" Rule

If your blackcurrant leaves look pale or the growth is stunted, it is almost always a feeding issue. In Scotland's high-rainfall areas, nutrients can leach out of the soil quickly. Don't be afraid to be generous with well-rotted manure every single spring.

2. Guarding the "Grip"

If you live in a coastal area (like the East Neuk of Fife or the Western Isles), "wind burn" can make leaves look scorched and brown at the edges. This isn't a disease; it's salt and wind damage. A simple windbreak of netting or planting a hardy companion like *Rosa rugosa* nearby can make a huge difference.

3. Avoid "Tired" Soil

If you remove an old, diseased blackcurrant bush, do not plant a new one in the exact same spot immediately. Pathogens and pests can linger in the soil. Move the new bush at least 3 meters away, or replace the soil in the planting hole with fresh compost.

A Quick History Note

Did you know that during WWII, the British government distributed blackcurrant syrup for free to children?

Because citrus fruits couldn't be imported, the humble blackcurrant became the primary source of Vitamin C for the nation. Scotland's ability to grow them so well made our gardens a vital part of the "Dig for Victory" campaign!

A Pro-Tip for the Scottish Gardener

Since blackcurrants love a heavy mulch in March, plant your companions slightly further out from the main stem (about 30cm). This allows you to pile on your manure or compost every spring without burying your companion plants!

Black Currant Uses

When the harvest comes in July and August, the kitchen becomes a hive of activity. Because blackcurrants have a thick skin and a punchy tartness, they hold up beautifully in traditional Scottish puddings and preserves.

Here are two essential recipes to make the most of your Scottish garden bounty.

1. Blackcurrant & Drambuie Cranachan

While traditional Cranachan uses raspberries, the sharp snap of blackcurrants against the honeyed cream is a revelation. The dark purple juices create a beautiful marbled effect.

Ingredients (Serves 4):

- 300g Fresh blackcurrants (stalks removed)
- 75g Caster sugar (plus a little extra for the cream)
- 400ml Double cream
- 50g Steel-cut or jumbo porridge oats
- 2 tbsp Scottish Heather Honey
- 2-3 tbsp Whisky or Drambuie (Drambuie's herbal honey notes pair perfectly with blackcurrants)

Method:

- The Compote: Put the blackcurrants, sugar, and a splash of water in a small pan. Simmer gently for 3-5 minutes until the berries just begin to burst and release their deep purple syrup. Leave to cool completely.
- The Oats: Toast the oats in a dry frying pan over medium heat, tossing frequently until they smell nutty and look golden. Remove from the heat immediately so they don't burn.
- The Cream: Whisk the double cream until it forms soft peaks. Fold in the honey, the Drambuie, and most of the toasted oats (save some for the top).
- Assembly: Gently fold about a third of the cooled blackcurrant compote into the cream to create a "ripple."
- Serve: In tall glasses, layer the rippled cream with spoonfuls of the remaining compote. Top with a final sprinkle of crunchy oats and a drizzle of honey.

2. "The Tart Queen" Blackcurrant Jam

Blackcurrants are packed with natural pectin, making them the easiest fruit for beginners to set. This jam is thick, dark, and perfect on a warm tattie scone.

Ingredients:

- 1kg Blackcurrants
- 750ml Water
- 1.5kg Granulated sugar (warmed in the oven for 10 mins)
- Optional: A knob of butter (to reduce foam)

Method:

- The Soften: Put the currants and water into a large preserving pan. Bring to a boil and simmer for 20–30 minutes. You want the skins to be completely soft before you add the sugar; otherwise, they will toughen and stay hard in the jam.
- The Set: Add the warmed sugar and stir over low heat until fully dissolved. Increase the heat to a rolling boil. If a lot of "scum" or foam forms, add a small knob of butter to clear it.
- The Test: Boil hard for about 10–15 minutes. To test for a "set," put a teaspoon of jam on a chilled saucer. Let it sit for a minute, then push it with your finger—if it wrinkles, it's ready.
- The Potting: Pour into warm, sterilized jars. Seal immediately.

A Scottish Gardener's Secret: Blackcurrant Leaf Tea

Don't throw away the leaves! In early summer, pick a few young, bright green leaves and steep them in boiling water for 5 minutes. It produces a surprisingly delicate, aromatic tea that smells exactly like the scent of the garden after rain.

Wildlife & Garden Use

- **Wildlife:** The early flowers provide vital nectar for emerging bumblebees.
- **Garden Use:** Use them as an edible hedge or a "mid-story" filler in a shrubbery. They also work well in pots (minimum 15-20 litre containers) if kept well-watered.

Companion Plants: Plant with chives or garlic at the base to help deter mites and aphids.

FAQ

Q: Why is my bush not fruiting?

A: It could be a late frost killing the blossom, a lack of water during fruit set, or the plant is too old and needs a hard "rejuvenation" prune.

Q: Can I eat them straight from the bush?

A: Yes, though they are tart! Modern varieties like 'Ebony' are sweet enough for snacking, but most are best cooked with a little sugar.

Q: How long will a bush last?

A: With good pruning, a blackcurrant bush can remain productive for 10–15 years.