

GROWING SOFT FRUIT IN CONTAINERS

Strawberries are the kings of soft fruit, but there are vibrant alternatives for the adventurous grower.

When growing food in containers, we often include some strawberries, but forget about other suitable soft fruit like currants, gooseberries, goji berries and blueberries.

Growing soft fruit is every bit as rewarding as herbs, leaves and tomatoes. If space is at a premium and every planter must look good and pull its weight, choose your favourite fruit and decide how large a harvest you require. Nothing beats half a dozen strawberry plants spilling over the side of a container, but don't expect more than a couple of strawberries per plant at a time. If you can't resist strawberries, be realistic and make space for at least a dozen plants. One gooseberry or blueberry, on the other hand, will supply a decent bowl of dessert fruits at a picking and you'll get as many currants as you want.

Choosing the right container is equally important. If you've a tiny patio, use your vertical space and invest in a traditional strawberry planter to achieve those minimum dozen plants. Very few fruit bushes will thrive in pots with a smaller diameter than 45cm, though gojis and blueberries should be started off in 30cm ones; blueberries are gradually increased to 45cm and gojis will finally need a planter the width of a barrel.

Most soft fruit bushes thrive in general purpose compost, but, as ever, they'll do best in home-made compost. The plants will take up feed from this wonderful free compost as they need it throughout the summer, but can only draw nutrients from commercial composts for a couple of months. Whichever compost you use, keeping it moist and free-draining is essential, and you'll help this by mixing in water retaining pellets: as soil starts to dry out, the pellets gradually release their stored water; grit or sharp sand provide necessary drainage. When watering, give the pot a good soak once a week, rather than a nightly dribble, and mulch round a plant to prevent evaporation. Blueberries need much more acid soil than other soft fruit, a pH of 5.5 or less, so need ericaceous compost. If using your own compost, buy sulphur chips to mix in and reduce pH levels.

Fill the pot to within 3 or 4 centimetres of the rim to let you add more compost if necessary and to prevent run off when watering. Then dig a hole to let the crown of a plant sit slightly proud of the compost level. If you're using a large pot for strawberries, plant 30cm apart. Fruit hanging over the side stays clean, but elsewhere in the container, they should be planted through a black plastic sheet or a special strawberry mat. Alternatively, use the traditional method of surrounding each plant with straw as soon as the flower buds appear. I just can't have enough strawberries so grow some in the polytunnel to get the first ones a full fortnight before outdoor ones.

Grow gooseberries and white and redcurrants in 45cm planters, though you'll find the more vigorous blackcurrants more challenging. With all these fruits, good air circulation is essential, so, given a pot's restricted space, they're best trained against a wall. A well trained bush is so rewarding: people can't help admiring its shape; you can harvest gooseberries without giving blood; and the subtle autumn colours provide an added bonus. I have horizontal wires 30cm apart, and train the branches of my 'Leveller' gooseberry along each wire from a central point. By ruthlessly pruning any stem going in the wrong direction, and by cutting side shoots from the main stems back to 2 buds, I'm guaranteed large, succulent fruits. You can train currants in the same way.

I find my blueberry works well as a free standing bush. Apart from cutting out some old woody branches every year, I give my 'Tophat' very little attention: a dwarfing variety, it won't grow any taller than 60cm. Once a blueberry starts flowering, it needs a monthly liquid feed: there are several organic ericaceous feeds on the market.

Goji berries are becoming very popular at the moment. Lycium barbarum is also known as 'Wolfberry' or 'The Duke of Argyll's Tea Tree', since the leaves were once infused as a tea. Crammed with antioxidants, it's supposed to be very good for you: in fact, Himalayan consumers are said to live for an impressive 120 to 150 years. When planting in general purpose compost, don't give it any fertiliser or bone meal as this could burn young roots. These bushes would grow to 1.8 metres, so need careful pruning in a pot: keep them under control by cutting back new growth by half every year.

Apart from blackcurrants, soft fruit looks every bit as attractive to the birds as to us, so net assiduously; and scatter a few organic slug pellets round the strawberries so you'll not have to share them with the mollusc brigade. You can prevent the all too common powdery mildew by keeping the plants moist and well pruned. A weekly spray of liquid seaweed makes an excellent tonic for most container plants.

Why not brighten up the patio and graze on succulent berries?