

# Growing Fruit at BARAGA

Quoting from the BARAGA handbook the first purpose of the garden is to provide opportunities for fruit and vegetable gardening. Every allotment has vegetables, but many of us do not take advantage of the opportunity to grow fruit.

The most likely reason for this is the commitment in time and money that fruit growing seems to imply. There are, however, many good reasons for growing fruit and once past the initial plunge lots of benefits without arduous work.

Perhaps the principle reason for considering growing your own fruit is value. Fruit tends to be expensive. Take blueberries for an example, even "pick your own" berries are \$2 per pound. But one bush in the garden will yield five to ten pounds of berries. Occupying only about a square metre of garden space, how many cabbages (for example) could be grown in the same space.

Or the most persuasive reason could be taste - better tasting varieties, grown in organic conditions, picked ripe and consumed at their prime. Compare strawberries from your garden with the hard, methane-ripened berries grown in California and shipped to the supermarket. If variety is important to you, the only way some treasured flavour can be obtained is by growing your own. There are literally hundreds of varieties of apples, but a well-stocked grocery is likely to have less than ten on their shelves.

From the perspective of nutrition fruit are at least the equal of vegetables and certainly important as part of a balanced diet containing many of the vitamins and minerals

that we need. Most children gladly accept fruit while wiggling out of eating their veggies.

Ecologically fruit grown in our gardens beats imports by miles - often thousands of miles.



## **Berries and other soft fruit**

**Blueberries:** in a completely natural area one of the native plants to be found thriving in an acidic bog is the blueberry. While the native variety is very tasty, cross breeding of blueberry species has resulted in much more productive bushes. Some enhancement of soil fertility will increase the crop, but do not add lime; blueberries prefer a ph of about 5.5. Disease wise blueberries are generally trouble free.

Two problems a gardener may incur are: blueberries stock is in high demand and nurseries must compete with commercial growers for available stock, so the best varieties may be hard to find. Secondly BARAGA has lots of resident birds who also find blueberries delicious, so some protection must be devised for ripening crops.

**Cranberries:** these are another fruit that occur naturally in boggy acidic soil and cultivation requirements are similar. As with blueberries success is almost guaranteed.

**Raspberries:** almost as easy to grow as the above are raspberries. The major group are summer fruiting varieties; the early fall fruiting varieties (everbearing) are widely planted at BARAGA and seem ideally suited to the acidic soil. Raspberries are most easily managed if grown in rows with supports; canes that have fruited need to be removed. Although there are raspberry diseases (particularly viral), they are not much in evidence.

**Strawberries:** there seems to be an adverse ratio in flavour/productivity in strawberries - the larger the yield the less the flavour. Alpine strawberries with small berries are packed with taste, The traditional mulch (chopped straw) keeps the berries out of the soil and hopefully out of the reach of slugs, sowbugs and such creatures.

**Blackberries:** wild berries are free and need no cultivation at all. But if you want a sure crop, thornless picking, your own patch, you can grow these tasty, healthy berries with ease. All that is required is some root space and some support, a little mulch and fertilizer in spring, and control of the exuberant growth. In a garden the berries will keep coming if watered in the driest period.

**Tayberries & Loganberries:** both of these berries are crosses between raspberries and blackberries (Loganberries were discussed in a Seedling in 2007). These berries are vigorous and productive, growing

well our area. They do need to be trained to a wire system, pruned to replace old canes with new, and the roots kept free from water-logging.

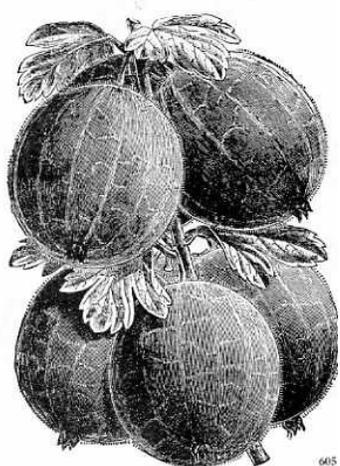
**Gooseberries:** several varieties of gooseberries are available from nurseries. Gooseberries are apparently an old-fashioned fruit, not generally stocked in stores, but they are easy to grow, requiring little attention except minimal care of fertilizing, weeding, watering and occasional pruning to control shape and vigour.

**Currents:** much the same is true of currents as gooseberries. There are red, white and black varieties with fond associations for European descendants. Unfortunately currents are an alternate host for pine blister rust and were outlawed in much of North America at one time.

**Grapes:** many varieties of grape are available from sweet table grapes to wine producing varieties and many are successfully grown at BARAGA. Pruning and training (to a two wire system) is essential for growing. Mulch in spring with compost or a well-rotted manure. In hot summers, such as this year, an abundant harvest is almost guaranteed.

**Kiwi:** it should be possible to grow kiwi fruit at BARAGA although I have not seen any. Both a male and female plant are essential for fruit to form. Otherwise their cultivation is very much like grapes. Be warned: they are very vigorous fast-growing plants.

**Melons:** only in very hot summers such as this year are melons successful in our area. They require a long period of hot days to form palatable fruit. There are varieties of both musk melons and watermelons that are



recommended for our area. Like cucumbers, their relatives warming the soil with black plastic and protecting with row cover in spring will help get the plants off to an early start.

**Rhubarb:** not a fruit at all, rhubarb is a good substitute for early fruit. A clump established in well fertilized soil will continue to produce succulent stalks year after year, long before any other dessert is available from the garden.

**Saskatoons:** although the garden soil is wrong, saskatoon berries can be grown. The fruit and culture is somewhat akin to blueberries.

## Fruit Trees & Shrubs

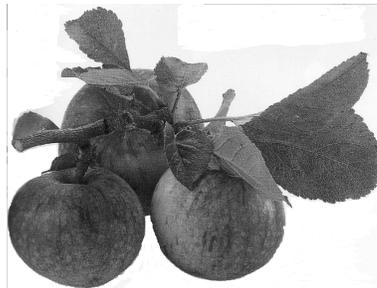
Before considering what fruit trees can be grown in our allotments, we should note that at BARAGA there are restrictions; trees can only be seven feet tall, they must not impede the pathways between gardens and they must not shade the neighbour's plot. While this may seem somewhat onerous if you want an orchard, actually many viable farms (orchards) are now growing their crops on dwarf stock that easily meet the above conditions. A good example is the Apple Farm near Yarrow in the Fraser Valley. All operations can be done on foot at ground level.

Almost all fruit trees are routinely grafted onto root stocks. In fruit orchards the low height is achieved by using dwarf root stocks. Several small trees are planted in a row usually supported by a system of sturdy wires, sometimes stakes. There are numerous ways of growing dwarf trees; cordons are single stems grown at an angle; espaliers are trained in more complex designs, sometimes in elaborate candelabra shapes or fans. Training requires some knowledge, faithful attention and lots of patience. Sometimes stock already trained is

available, but the price tends to be steep.

As well as careful attention to the spread of the tree above ground, the spread and needs of the roots have to be considered. An espaliered pear tree, for example, may need as much as eight feet, so only two or three pear trees could be grown in a row across the typical allotment. One of the gardener's most difficult tasks is envisioning how a mature plant will appear and allowing sufficient space without wasting any. When buying a fruit tree the advice of a well-informed nursery salesman may make a higher price a good investment.

**Apple:** while few apples varieties are on the selves in the marketplace, literally hundreds are available to



the gardener from specialized nurseries. It is the only sure way of getting some of the tastier apple varieties. Apple trees like good drainage and the blossoms require freedom from frost. Some varieties suffer from diseases that thrive in our damp climate. Pollination is critical and cross pollination must be considered.

**Pear:** much of the same remarks about apples also applies to pears. There are fewer varieties available,



but successful pears require a grafted plant from a recognized stock. Pears (like apples) are sometimes available with suitable cross pollinators grafted to the same scion.

**Plum:** much the same could be said for plums. Choose a variety (or varieties) grafted on a dwarf rootstock, carefully and faithfully prune to a low espalier shape, nurture in a rich soil. Pollination may not matter so much since European varieties are self fertile. Watch out for a black, knobby, fungus that attacks plum trees; cut out any effected growth and apply a fungicide.

**Cherry:** unlike plums, cherry trees do not take kindly to pruning. However they are sometimes trained. If only one cherry is to be grown it must be a self-pollinating variety. Not only are cherries subject to several diseases, successful crop of fruit will have to be protected from birds.

**Apricot:** our climate just is not right for apricots, too mild and wet in winter, not nearly hot enough or long enough in summer. Perhaps twenty years of climate change will make a difference.

**Peach & Nectarine:** although peaches are sometimes grown successfully on specially selected sites in our area, success with these is unlikely at BARAGA. Peach leaf curl and several other diseases are likely in our damp climate.

**Elderberry:** black elderberry produces clusters of little current like fruit good for jams, jellies and wine. The tree might be difficult to maintain in the BARAGA context.

**Medlar:** while it is not hard to grow these fruit, gardeners who have not grown up with a taste for medlars may be disappointed in these hard fruit. They only become edible after being "bled" - a process roughly equivalent to letting the fruit rot all winter.

**Quince:** quinces like medlars are an acquired taste. However they can be grown productively in our area and probably at BARAGA. Since the flavour of quinces affects other fruit grown nearby, they are really an unsuitable choice for an allotment garden.

**Figs:** it is possible to grow and ripen figs at BARAGA. Winter can be hard on them and it is a major task to restrain their rampant growth to available space.

**Others:** fruit trees like citrus, persimmons, mulberries, pomegranates might sound attractive, but only a dedicated fanatic is likely to succeed with any of them. Perhaps, better not to try?

**Nuts:** while nuts are desirable and nutritional it is hard to imagine that any nut tree could be grown within the tree limitations that an allotment garden (and BARAGA policy) requires.

