



Top Tips For Easy Soft Fruit

I love growing my own vegetables, so much so I rent a (rather expensive) allotment because it has gets a lot more sun than my own garden. But I know that looking after vegetables can be time consuming if you have a very busy life; you need to keep up with watering, weeding, pest checking and harvesting. But soft fruit can be an easy option for 'grow your own' and it's a real treat to pick fruit off the plant and eat it there and then; it certainly encourages young children to eat fresh fruit. Added to that you'll encourage pollinators into your garden and support wildlife (but not too much – make sure you net plants so the fruit isn't harvested by birds, mice, slugs etc.)

There's a soft fruit for any sort of space...

Containers (small to large)

Perfect for **strawberries**; choose varieties with a long fruiting season such 'Albion' or 'Finesse'. They can grow in pots, hanging baskets, troughs, window boxes etc. Just make sure they get sun and water and the fruits are protected from getting damp, slugs and other wildlife that may eat them.

Blueberries will grow happily in acid soil or large containers in ericaceous compost (lime-free) - feed them with a liquid fertiliser for acid-loving plants in the spring and harvest the berries in August/September. They need plenty of sun to ripen but little regular care, apart from watering. Look at this easy guide for selecting a variety

<http://www.dorsetblueberry.co.uk/grow-your-own-blueberries.html>



Semi-shade

Raspberries are woodland plants that grow well in semi-shade and need little care. You can plant summer and autumn fruiting varieties to extend your season. Plant in rows and make sure you put in sturdy stakes and wire so you can tie them in, as the canes can grow up to 6 feet or more high (1.8m). Check that you've planted them somewhere that is convenient for harvesting to avoid scratches from the thorns. When buying your canes make sure they are guaranteed 'virus-free'.

Shade and wet ground

Blackcurrants can thrive in awkward corners that are too wet and dark for many other plants and produce plenty of fruit with only a few hours of sun each day. Just remember to prune out about one-third of the stems each winter to encourage fresh growth and mulch them (see my Top Tips for more information on mulching). Good varieties are 'Ben Sarek' and 'Ben Connan'

Well Drained soil

Gooseberries do need good soil and sunshine to thrive, they don't appreciate frost pockets either! But they are simple to care for, just fertilise in the spring and mulch in the winter. Grow them as miniature trees with a short trunk, cutting back new growth by one half each November. The variety 'Whinham's Industry' is my favourite for the large, red fruit.

When to buy and plant

All of these fruits can be bought cheaply as 'bare root' plants from November to March and planted into your garden soil or containers. There are many good mail order specialist suppliers that give a broader choice than the average garden centre. But make sure you plant any 'bare root' plants as soon as you get them. If the roots look dry plunge them into a bucket of water for 30 minutes before planting in a large hole with added compost or manure and bonemeal. Water in well after planting.

Netting

To protect your fruit use special 'bird netting' with large enough holes to let pollinating insects through and stop birds from tangling their claws.

