
Gogi Berries

Goji berries and products derived from them have been popular for several years and many references refer to them as a “superfood”. Goji (*Lycium barbarum*) is native to tropical or warm regions of mainland East and Southeast Asia and South Africa. Other common names are wolfberry, matrimony vine, and boxthorn. They are woody plants having a growth habit ranging from viney to erect. Many cultivars are available from online vendors. They are in the nightshade family (Solanaceae) and related to tomatoes and peppers.

Multiple hardy Goji berry cultivars are available for USDA Plant Hardiness Zones 4 - 7. Spines are present on most cultivars but vary in size and number. When pruned, plants are typically 3 to 6 feet tall but if left without cultivation they can reach 12 feet. Solitary, purple blossoms form in the late spring (although some species have greenish or cream flowers) and are followed by small orange to red fruit about 4 to 6 weeks later. Plants are self-fruitful and do not require cross-pollination. Some references also say they can become weedy as they spread by suckers and seed.

The red, elliptical ½ to 1 inch berries are high in nutrient and antioxidant content. Goji is a new crop in American markets, so cultivar selection is still limited. 'Crimson Star' and 'Phoenix Tears,' are available. Both begin bearing 1 to 2 years after planting, although they will not reach full production for 3 to 5 years. 'Wolfberry Agrodevco' is another cultivar, but it has limited availability. Many nurseries do not list specific cultivars of goji, but rather list them simply as *Lycium barbarum*.

Utah State University Extension recommends that goji be planted in a location with full sun. Goji plants can handle relatively harsh conditions and are a good choice for locations that may not work well for other, more traditional, fruits. Goji grows in slightly alkaline soil (pH of 7 to 8) so our local soils should be well-suited. Goji plants prefer a light loam, but can be grown in clay soils if irrigation is closely managed to avoid waterlogging.

Before planting, make sure there is enough room in all directions for the plant to reach full size (about 4 to 5 feet in all directions) and to allow for easy harvest. Although fairly drought-tolerant once established, more frequent irrigation is needed to establish new transplants. Irrigation needs vary depending on soil type and time of year. Sandy soils need to be watered more frequently than clay soils as they drain quickly. In general, apply approximately 1 inch of water per week after establishment. Drip irrigation is the most efficient irrigation method and helps keep weeds and diseases suppressed.

Too much fertility results in excess vegetation, shading, and reduced fruit quality. There are no specific fertilizer recommendations for goji in our region; however, some growers amend the soil of new plantings based on recommendations for tomato production. There is some evidence suggesting that established goji perform very well with little or no fertilization.

Fruits form on current year's wood and pruning encourages new growth, increasing yields. Pruning is also important to keep the plant open to allow for good light penetration and air circulation. Typically, no pruning is required in the first year. However, increased pruning in subsequent years is needed to maintain vigorous new growth. Suckers begin to form after 3 to 4 years. These should be removed and can be transplanted.

We also have a native wolfberry (*Lyceum pallidum*) in northern Arizona which is also called rabbit thorn. This plant is often associated with prehistoric diets and is often found growing near archeological sites in our area. References indicate wolfberry must be cooked to disperse poisonous compounds. For this reason, Cooperative Extension does not recommend eating the local wolfberry fruits unless you have knowledge of their safe preparation.

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