

Growing Currants and Gooseberries

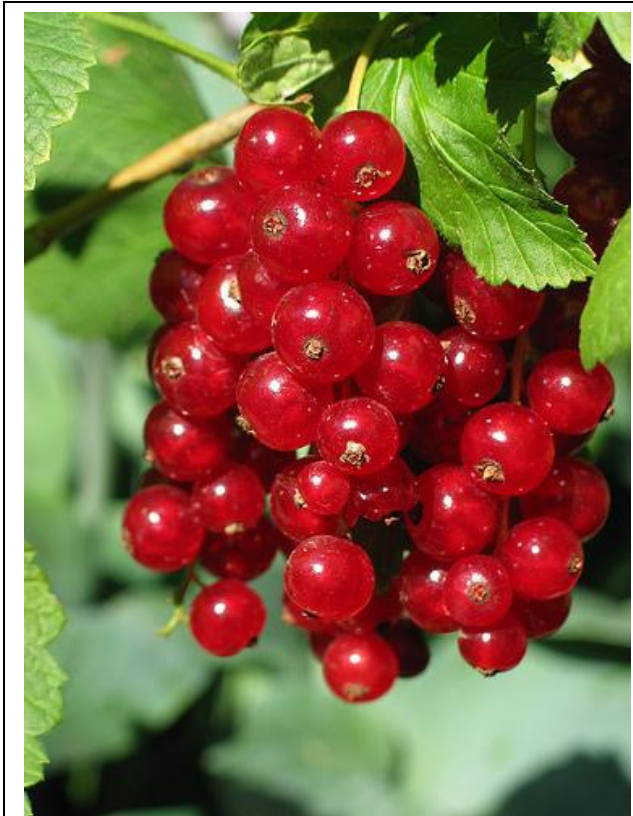


Fig. 1. A cluster of red currant fruit. (Photograph courtesy <http://correntewire.com/tags/wine>)

Currants and gooseberries (*Ribes* species) are enjoying resurgence in popularity among home gardeners. This is understandable – they are hardy and easy to grow. In addition, their fruits make excellent pies, jams and jellies. Unlike most other fruit crops, currants and gooseberries tolerate partial shade, making them adaptable to difficult locations in the home landscape. They are nutritious and high in Vitamin C.

Legalities of Growing *Ribes* sp.: Unfortunately, all *Ribes* species are alternate hosts for the white pine blister rust fungus. In the early 1900's the federal and state governments outlawed the growing of currants and gooseberries to prevent the spread of white pine blister rust (*Cronartium ribicola*). This fungal disease attacks both *Ribes* and white pines, which must live in close proximity for the blister rust fungus to complete life cycle. Black currants (*Ribes nigrum*) and white pines (*Pinus strobus*) are extremely susceptible and red currants and gooseberries exhibit varying degrees of susceptibility. Severe losses of timber (eastern white) pine have been recorded in the past from this disease. For more information on the Environmental Conservation Law Parts 192.1, 192.2, 192.3 & 192.4 in regard to growing *Ribes* species in NYS including the counties that have been designated as "fruiting currant districts" go to the following NYS DEC web site

<https://www.law.cornell.edu/regulations/new-york/6-NYCRR-192.3>

Currants and gooseberries prefer a cool, moist growing site for optimal performance. A rich well-drained soil that has a high moisture-holding capacity is preferable. Incorporation of organic matter (compost, peat, manure, etc.) is desirable, particularly if the soil is somewhat sandy. Sites with poor air circulation may have increased incidence of powdery mildew; sloping ground helps alleviate this condition. Test the pH to assure that it is in the desired range (6.2 - 6.5). Amend the soil with lime if necessary before planting. Information on having soil pH tested can be obtained from the [Cornell Cooperative Extension – Suffolk County web site](http://www.ccesuffolk.org) or contact our office directly.

Plant nursery stock after the soil has been thoroughly prepared. Fall planting is best, because currants and gooseberries begin growth very early in the spring. Remove any damaged roots and head back the tops to 6 - 10 inches before planting. Place plants slightly deeper than they grew in the nursery.

Plants will remain productive for many years if properly cared for. Annual topdressings of composted manure are beneficial; if vigor is lacking, lightly broadcast about 1/4 to 1/2 lb. of 10-10-10 per plant. To keep the soil cool in the summer and help retain soil moisture mulch with straw, lawn rakings, composted manure, compost, etc. Mulching also keeps the weed population down -- a plus for any home garden.

Late winter or early spring pruning is essential for greatest fruit production. *Ribes* species produce fruit at the base on one-year-old wood; the greatest production occurs on fruiting spurs of two- and three-year-old wood. A strong, healthy bearing plant should have about six to ten bearing canes, and three or four new ones coming along to replace the oldest each year. To accomplish this, remove all but six to eight of the most vigorous shoots the first year. At the end of the second growing season, leave several one-year-old shoots and several two-year-old canes. At the end of the third year,

leave three or four canes of one- and two- and three-year-old wood unpruned. This system of renewal ensures that the plants will remain productive.

Currants and gooseberries are an interesting supplement to the home garden and landscape. They offer delicious fruits and require little care.

Cultivar Selection

Red Currants (*Ribes rubrum*, *R. sativum*, and *R. petraeum*)

- Many people consider Rovada to be the best red currant cultivar. Plants are dependable, vigorous, late ripening, and very productive, bearing long-stemmed clusters of large red berries that are easy to pick.

White Currants (A type of red currant, white currant cultivars are sold less frequently by nurseries)

- Blanka is the most commonly available. Most people prefer White Imperial or Primus if available.

Black Currants (*Ribes nigrum*) – black currants are currently illegal to grow in New York State. See footnote ¹ below regarding immune or resistant cultivars listed below.

- The cultivars Consort, Crusader, and Titania, are hybrids that are resistant to the blister rust fungus.

Gooseberries – there are two types of gooseberry plants – American (*Ribes hirtellum*) and European (*Ribes uva-crispa*)

Cultivars of the American type are smaller but more resistant to powdery mildew. They tend to be healthier and more productive. American cultivars include:

- Poorman – one of the largest American types, productive, vigorous, a good cultivar for the home garden
- Oregon Champion – medium to large yellow-green berries and excellent for processing
- Hinnonmaki Red and Hinnonmaki Yellow – medium sized red and green fruit respectively
- Captivor – an American-European cross, red fruit, nearly thornless, resistant to powdery mildew
- Pixwell – commonly sold, productive, but fruit quality is poor

Fruits of European cultivars are larger and better flavored. They include:

- Invicta – considered by some to be the best cultivar in North America, resists powdery mildew, susceptible to leaf spot, very large fruit with a bland flavor
- Leveller and Careless – the standards for British fruit production, yellow & green fruit respectively.
- Early Sulfur – fruit is yellow, hairy, has good flavor, but is susceptible to powdery mildew
- Catherina – large green fruit
- Achilles – large red fruit

Choose strong, well-rooted plants from a reliable nursery. Use either one- or two-year-old vigorous stock. For information on sources of plants you can utilize the link to the [Nursery Guide For Berry Crops](#) on the Cornell Cooperative Extension – Suffolk County web site.

Information regarding “choosing cultivars” obtained from *Cornell Guide to Growing Fruit at Home*. Cornell University 2003. This publication can be purchased from Cornell Cooperative Extension – Suffolk County by contacting our office directly.

Resource: Eames-Sheavly, Marcia. *Currants and Gooseberries*. Cornell University June 1987.

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