

Chapter 8. Ribes—Gooseberries and Currants

Gooseberries and currants (*Ribes* spp.) have enjoyed great popularity in the past, particularly in Europe, where in the 1800s as many as 722 gooseberry varieties were in existence, and “gooseberry clubs” were established by enthusiasts. Most of the European varieties were large fruited and sweet as a result of centuries of selection and breeding, while American types had less desirable flavor and more disease resistance. The gooseberries grown today are primarily hybrids of these two types, offering good flavor as well as disease (mildew) resistance. Although they seldom are eaten fresh due to their tart flavor, both red and white currants make excellent jams and jellies. Gooseberries and currants are woody perennial shrubs that reach a height of 3 to 6 feet when mature. Unlike other fruiting plants, they will tolerate partial shade. Plants are self-fruitful and, therefore, do not require two or more varieties for adequate pollination. Currants and gooseberries also are very winter hardy, tolerating temperatures as low as -22 to -31°F.

Gooseberries

CAPTIVATOR: An American-European hybrid that produces large, sweet, pinkish-red fruit. Plants are resistant to mildew.

PIXWELL: Sold most often and is very productive and hardy, but the fruit is only of fair quality. Fruit is best if harvested slightly under ripe. Plants are mildew-resistant.

POORMAN: Red-fruited, large, and flavorful. The fruit ripens over a long season and is the best variety of the American types for home gardens since it is vigorous and has fewer and smaller thorns than most varieties. It is resistant to powdery mildew.

Several European varieties are available from specialty nurseries. The fruit of the European types usually is larger and better flavored; however, the varieties without resistance to powdery mildew can be devastated by the strains of the fungus found in the United States.

HINNONMAKI RED: Has a tart skin but sweet, aromatic flesh. Plants are moderately vigorous and partially resistant to mildew.

INVICTA: Has large, pale-green fruit and less flavor than most European types. Plants are large and have many spines. Has good resistance to powdery mildew.



Figure 267. Gooseberries make excellent jams and jellies. The cultivar shown here is *Invicta*. Photo courtesy of Nourse Farms Nursery.

Currants (Red)

CASCADE: Matures early. Fruit is large and dark red, but vigor and productivity are only medium.

JONKEERS VAN TETS: Produces heavy yields. Fruit is dark red and has a very good flavor. Resistant to mildew and aphids; susceptible to botrytis.

RED LAKE: A vigorous, hardy, and productive variety. The fruit is large, bright red when mature, and of good quality. The long-stemmed clusters are easy to pick. Susceptible to powdery mildew.

ROVADA: A dependable producer. It blooms and fruits late, so frost is less of a problem than with other varieties. Resistant to powdery mildew and other leaf diseases.



Figure 268. Like gooseberries, red currants also make excellent jams and jellies. The cultivar shown here is *Rovada*.

Photo courtesy of Nourse Farms Nursery.

WILDER: Very much like Red Lake—high yielding with good-quality berries. Has more resistance to leaf spot.

Currants (White and Pink)

BLANKA: Dependable and produces heavy yields. Plants are vigorous and easy to grow.

PINK CHAMPAGNE: Has good quality and flavor. As the name indicates, fruit is an interesting shade of pink, but yields tend to be low.

PRIMUS: Produces fruit late in the season. Plants are vigorous. Similar to Blanka in most characteristics, but yields are slightly lower.

WHITE IMPERIAL: Has low acidity and produces moderate yields. Plants have a spreading habit.

Currants (Black)

Only varieties with good resistance to white pine blister rust are listed below.

BEN SAREK: Highly recommended for the home gardener. Bushes are compact, approximately 3 feet in height at maturity, with high yields and easy-to-pick fruit. Makes excellent jam and jelly and is recommended for wine making. Highly resistant to white pine blister rust.

CONSORT: Produces a medium crop of small to medium fruit. Plants are self-fertile. Though resistant to white pink blister rust, this variety is susceptible to leaf spots and mildew.

CORONET: Yields are usually low and fruit is of marginal quality. A pollinator is required.

CRUSADER: Only marginally productive, and quality is low. A pollinator is required.

TITIANA: Produces heavy crops of large, high-quality fruit. Has very high resistance to white pine blister rust.

Currants (Clove or Buffalo)

CRANDALL: A native species of currant that is sometimes considered more closely related to gooseberries than currants. Valued for its highly fragrant blossoms.

Planting and Nutritional Requirements

In fall or early spring, plant well-rooted, 1- or 2-year-old dormant plants, cutting back the top portions of the plant to 6 to 10 inches. Space plants 3 to 4 feet apart in rows 6 to 8 feet apart. Note that plants can be vegetatively propagated by stem cuttings. Another possibility is to graft gooseberries and/or currants onto a tree species of *Ribes* called *Ribes aureum*. Grafting can be done on a convenient height of the tree, allowing the bush to produce fruit higher up, thus aiding in ease of harvest and weed control around the base of the plants. Remove flower blossoms from plants in the first year to encourage plant establishment and growth for future years. Well-established plants can fruit for 10 to 15 years or more. To fertilize, apply 6 to 8 ounces of 10-10-10 annually in an 18-inch ring around the plant in early spring.

Pruning

Red currants and gooseberries produce fruit at the base of 1-year-old wood, with the greatest production on spurs of 2- and 3-year-old wood. After 3 or 4 years, the older wood becomes less productive and therefore should be gradually replaced with young shoots by a thinning and renewal process. Black currants produce the best fruit on wood that is 1 year old, although this wood is supported by the 2- to 3-year-old shoots. All canes older than 3 years old should be removed to encourage the growth of new canes.

Prune dormant plants in early spring just before growth resumes, usually in March or early April in Pennsylvania. Remove canes that drop on the

soil or canes that shade out the center of the plant. After the first season of growth, remove all but six to eight of the most vigorous shoots. After the second season, retain four or five 1-year-old shoots and three or four 2-year-old canes. Following the third season, keep three or four canes each of 1-, 2-, and 3-year-old wood. In subsequent years, remove all of the oldest canes, replacing them annually with new canes.

Harvest

Pick fully colored fruit as they appear, usually in late June or July in Pennsylvania. Each plant will produce between 5 to 7 pounds when mature (usually during the third or fourth year).

**Most of the above information on gooseberries and currants was taken from PennState Bulletin #AGRS-99 "Fruit for the Home Gardener."*

White Pine Blister Rust

White pine blister rust is not a serious disease of currants and gooseberries; however, it is a very serious disease of white pines (*Pinus strobus*). Currants and gooseberries serve as an alternate host for the rust fungus that causes white pine blister rust. Therefore, planting currants and gooseberries in areas where white pines are present can lead to serious losses of white pines. North American white pine species, including bristlecone, limber, sugar, eastern white, southwestern white, western white, and white bark, are highly susceptible. White pine blister rust causes significant damage in pine forests by forming cankers on the branches of white pines. These cankers ultimately kill the trees. Black currant is the most susceptible of the *Ribes* species.

On *Ribes* in the spring, tiny yellowish spots become visible on the upper surface of the leaves, while on the underside, orange-yellow blister-like fruiting bodies appear (Figure 267). By late summer, yellow to brown threadlike growths develop on or near these infection spots on the leaf. Bushes also will have premature defoliation.



Figure 267. Symptoms of white pine blister rust on the underside of a current leaf.

On white pine, the symptoms include dead branches, chlorotic foliage, branch girdling by lesions that exude resin or sticky yellowish fluid (spermagonia), cankers that are diamond-shaped to elliptic with a dead center surrounded by a band of yellowish-green infected bark, light yellow-orange aecia, and death of the tree.

To protect white pine forests, several states have enacted laws concerning planting of black currants. The current Ohio law (Regulation AG-71-85.01) to suppress and control white pine blister rust disease is as follows:

- (A) The European black currant, *Ribes nigrum* L. or any cultivar of this species, is hereby declared to be a public nuisance, and it shall be unlawful for any person to possess, transport, plant, propagate, sell, or offer for sale, plants, roots, scions, seeds, or cuttings of these plants in this state.
- (B) Recognized cultivars, e.g., 'Consort' produced by the hybridization of *Ribes nigrum* L. or a cultivar thereof with a resistant or immune species, known to be immune or highly resistant to the White Pine Blister Rust fungus, (*Cronartium ribicola*, Fischer) are exempt from the restrictions imposed by paragraph (A) above.

To aid in prevention of this disease, remove susceptible *Ribes* species and infected plants and plant only disease-free resistant cultivars of *Ribes* approved by the Ohio Department of Agriculture. Some examples of resistant cultivars of black currant are 'Consort,' 'Crusader,' 'Coronet,' 'Ben Sarek,' and 'Ben Nevis.'

Red currants and gooseberries are not affected by Ohio law and are legal to plant. There are no fungicides labeled on currants and gooseberries for control of white pine blister rust.

Consult your state's Department of Agriculture or your Cooperative Extension Service for laws or regulations on the production of currants in your area.