

Currently Speaking, *Ribes* Gets a Bum Rap

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Description & History



The genus *Ribes* is the taxonomic home to the American Gooseberry (*R. hirtellum*), the European Gooseberry (*R. grossularia*), the European red, pink, and white currant species (*R. rubrum*, *R. petraeum*, and *R. sativum*), and the black currant species from Europe and Asia (*R. nigrum* and *R. ussuriense*). A new addition to the *Ribes* taxonomy grouping is 'Jostaberry' (*R. nigrum x hirtellum*) a hybridization of black currant and gooseberry.

The *Ribes* genus is native to the Northern Hemisphere with the bulk of commercial production centered in Northern Europe. *Ribes* species are well adapted to USDA Hardiness Zones 3 to 5, and to cooler, more temperate climate areas with sufficient winter chilling such as we have in the Pacific Northwest. Somewhat susceptible to intense sun and heat, they are more adapted to partial shade and northern

exposure sites.

Cultivated in Europe since the early 1500's and brought over to North America by colonists in the late 1700's, currants are prized for their culinary versatility, be it fresh dried, juiced, fermented, cooked or preserved. The first red currant recipes came to America with immigrants from Scotland, England, Wales and France and included classics like Cumberland sauce, summer pudding, and the famous French preserve, Bar le Duc jelly, from the town of the same name in Lorraine.

Commercial Production

For growers interested in currants as an alternative crop, the juice market is probably the most promising. The cool maritime climate of western Washington is well suited to production of high quality fruit. Machine harvesting systems are available that can be adapted to use in harvesting fruit for juice processing. Disease control (particularly for powdery mildew and rust) is a factor, but cultivars resistant to those diseases are becoming available to growers. This may allow for production under organic standards as well.

Potential Uses

Currant jellies, jams, and sauces are excellent, and can also be used for savory applications, such as dressings and sauces for game or patés. Dried currants find their way into a myriad of things including scones. Red-colored currants are most commonly used in pies and preserves. Currant juices produce 75% (red currants) to 450% (black currants) of the RDA for vitamin C.

Black currant juice has been incorporated in a number of commercially marketed juice blends. 'Ribena' black currant juice concentrate (in England) and blends of black currant and cranberry juices are available in supermarkets. Fermented products are also well known in European markets. 'Cassis,' a black currant cordial from France, and black currant wines are reportedly similar in flavor to Graves and Rhine wines. Black currants also contain bioflavonoids reported to reduce blood pressure, which draws the interest of health-conscious consumers.

One innovative product, recently introduced by [Perfect Purée of Napa Valley](#), is a frozen purée of red currants, pre-processed and seedless, that can be used in recipes and is available year-round. It is now available across the United States, Canada and Mexico through specialty food and produce distributors.

So why are currants slow to catch on here? Perhaps because in the early 1900's cultivation of any *Ribes* species was prohibited by a federal ban. *Ribes* are the alternate host of white pine blister rust, a problem for all five-needle pines and the lumber industry. The ban was rescinded in 1966, but several states continue to ban the cultivation of *Ribes* species. Limited commercial acreage, the short harvest season (from mid June until mid July) and limited access to fruit for commercial processing has prohibited wide North American distribution.

Perhaps black currants are slow to catch on because of their astringent taste when eaten raw, and people are unaware of their culinary potential. Or, perhaps it is because of associated disease problems. New varieties are available with resistance to powdery mildew and rust. Now is the time to reconsider black currants or other *Ribes sp.* and discover their delightful culinary versatility for yourself.

Preparation Suggestions & Basic Recipes

After picking, clean the currants, removing stems. Freezing the currants in plastic bags will make it easier to extract the juice, since freezing breaks down the cell walls. Juice can be extracted by steaming or by using commercial juice extractors.

(Recipes courtesy of Georgene Lee, WWFRF Treasurer and fruit preserver)

Currant Jam

Clean the currants, removing stems, and steam for 60 minutes to extract juice. Two pounds of cleaned currants (red, white or black) will yield about 5 cups of juice.
 5 cups currant juice
 7 cups sugar
 1 pouch Certo
 Follow directions on Certo package. Yield about 8 cups. Seal in sterilized jars.

Blackcurrant Sauce

Topping for ice cream, pancakes, pound cake etc.

Take 4 lbs. of black currants (approximately 12 cups of cleaned berries). Add 3 cups water and cook for 15 minutes until soft. Put through ricer and add 3 cups sugar. Seal in sterilized jars

Blueberry- Currant Jam

5 cups crushed blueberries

4 cups sugar

1 cup red currant juice

1 pouch Certo

Boil the blueberries, sugar, and currant juice for about 5 minutes, then add 1 pouch Certo and boil 1 minute. Ladle into hot sterilized jars and seal.

Additional Recipes

Bar le Duc Jelly

A choice currant preserve that originally came from the French town of Bar-le-Duc in Lorraine. At one time, the preserve was made only from white currants whose tiny seeds were removed manually. Today it's made with red and white currants as well as other berry fruits, and the seeds are not generally removed by hand. This version of the recipe is in the classic style:

Take selected currants of large size, one by one, and with tiny embroidery scissors carefully cut the skin on one side, making a slit of perhaps one-fourth an inch. Through this, with a sharp needle, remove the seeds, one at a time, to preserve the shape of the fruit. Weigh the fruit and take the weight of the fruit in strained honey, heat in non-aluminum saucepan. When hot, add the prepared fruit. Let simmer three or four minutes. Carefully skim out the fruit. Reduce the syrup, at a gentle simmer, to the desired consistency. Pour over the fruit. Then store as jelly.



Cumberland Sauce

1 c red currant jelly

2/3 c orange juice

1/4 c lemon juice

2 ts cornstarch

1 c Port or Madeira wine

1 tb grated orange peel (zest)

2 tb Grand Marnier

Combine first three ingredients in saucepan. Bring to a boil over low flame. Mix cornstarch and 1/4 cup wine until smooth; slowly add to jelly mixture, stirring constantly. Cook and stir until mixture starts to thicken slightly, stir in remaining wine and orange peel. Stir in the Grand Marnier just before serving. Yield: About 3 cups. Works excellently as a baste or sauce on duck, goose, ham or spareribs

Summer Pudding/Autumn Pudding

Prepared **fruit** – 700g (1½ lb) *

Water – 5 tbsp

Bread – 6–8 large slices, crust removed

Sugar – 110g (4 oz)

Fresh fruit and mint sprigs – to decorate

***Fruit for Summer Pudding** is typically a mixture of some or all of the following: raspberries, strawberries, stoned cherries, **redcurrants**, **blackcurrants**, gooseberries, rhubarb. For Autumn Pudding use a mixture of fruits such as apples, blackberries, plums and pears.

METHOD:

1. Gently stew the fruit in the water and sugar until soft but still retaining their shape.
2. Meanwhile, cut a round from one slice of bread to neatly fit in the bottom of a 1.1 litre (2 pint) pudding basin and cut 4–6 of the remaining slices into neat fingers. Arrange the fingers around the sides overlapping them so there are no spaces
3. When the fruit is cooked, and still hot, pour it gently in the basin, being careful not to disturb the bread pieces. Reserve about 3 tablespoons of the juice. When the basin is full, Cut the remaining bread and use to cover the fruit, to form a lid
4. Cover with foil, then a plate or saucer which fits just inside the bowl and put a weight on top. Leave the pudding until cold, then put into the refrigerator and chill overnight.
5. To serve, carefully run a knife round the edge to loosen, then invert the pudding on to a serving dish. Pour the reserved juice over the top. Serve cold with cream. Decorate with fruit and mint sprigs. Serves 4–6