

Gooseberries and Currants

Introduction

Gooseberries and currants (*Ribes* spp.) are woody, multi-stemmed shrubs best known for their tart fruit. While some enjoy eating them fresh, these fruit are especially prized for use in making jellies, jams, pies, and sauces.

Marketing

Berries are marketed fresh or processed as a juice, jam, jelly, or frozen product. Marketplace options include farmers markets and farm stands. Upscale or “white tablecloth” restaurants that make their own sauces and desserts may also be a market possibility for gooseberries and currants.

Market Outlook

Commercial production of gooseberries and currants has had limited success in the U.S., partially due to past federal restrictions on *Ribes* spp. production. White pine blister rust (WPBR) became a serious, widespread threat to white pines in the early 1900s. Because the WPBR fungus needs a *Ribes* plant to complete its life cycle, a ban was placed on gooseberry and currant production in an effort to control the disease on pines. While WPBR is lethal to pines, it does little harm to *Ribes* spp. The federal restriction was lifted in 1966, but there often remains confusion regarding the legality of growing these plants. While some states continue to restrict gooseberry and currant production, this is not the case in Kentucky, where white pine blister rust appears to be uncommon. Kentucky



GOOSEBERRIES

State University research indicates white, red and black currants, as well as gooseberries, have excellent potential at Kentucky local markets. Gooseberries have the greatest potential for fresh market sales.

Production Considerations

Site selection and planting

Gooseberries and currants prefer a rich, moist, well-drained soil; however they will tolerate a wide range of soil types. Avoid waterlogged soils, as well as low sites where spring frosts might settle and injure blossoms. Northern exposures that offer some afternoon shade are preferred, as is good air circulation.

Site preparation, including the destruction of all weeds, a year prior to planting is recommended. Well-rooted one-year-old cuttings are planted during dormancy in late fall or early spring. Black currant cultivars are generally self-sterile, thus cross pollination is necessary. Gooseberries, red currants and white currants, on the other hand, are self-fruitful so





WHITE AND RED CURRANTS

multiple cultivars are not required for pollination. Mature plants should be pruned annually during dormancy to remove older canes and to promote new growth. Pruning helps increase yields and keeps the bushes manageable. Irrigation in June and July is important for improved fruit size and reducing heat stress.

Pest management

It is recommended that growers generally select varieties that have white pine blister rust and powdery mildew resistance. Other potential disease problems include Septoria leaf spot and anthracnose. Based on Kentucky State University research trials, the cultivars listed in TABLE 1 performed well in Kentucky. Selections with disease susceptibility are also included

because they were superior in other production traits to those with resistance. WPBR susceptible cultivars should not be planted near white pines.

While these crops have few serious insect pests, injury from mites and aphids can occur occasionally. In some seasons birds can be a serious problem as fruit ripens. Good weed control is very important and can be accomplished with cultivation and/or the use of mulch. Kentucky growers may be able to use organic methods of producing these crops.

Harvest and storage

Gooseberries and currants ripen during the last part of June in Central Kentucky and have roughly a two-week harvest period. Fruit for processing is generally hand-picked when fully sized but not completely ripe. Unripe currants can be placed in cold storage for a few days, if necessary, while gooseberries can keep for up to 2 weeks. Fruit for fresh-use should be picked when fully ripe and marketed promptly.

There is a time lapse of 3 years after planting before the first harvest is realized. Unlike currants, gooseberries have needle-like thorns that slow harvest. Mature bushes can yield 4 to 8 pounds of fruit. Properly managed gooseberries and currants can continue to fruit for 15 years or more.

TABLE 1. GOOSEBERRY AND CURRANT CULTIVARS THAT HAVE PERFORMED WELL IN KENTUCKY.

	Resistant to WPBR¹ and PM²	Resistant to WPBR; not PM	Resistant to PM; not WPBR	Not resistant to WPBR nor PM
Gooseberry	Hinnomaki Red Amish Red Poorman			
Black currant	Titania		Ben Sarek Ben Lomond	
Red currant	Viking	Jonkeer Van Tets		Rovada
White currant	Primus		White Imperial	

¹WPBR = White Pine Blister Rust

²PM = Powdery Mildew

Labor requirements

Because of limited market demand, it is unlikely that gooseberries and currants will be planted in Kentucky on a per-acre basis. Labor needs per 120 plants (about one-fifth acre) are approximately 10 hours for production and 40 hours for harvest. Additional labor time will be required for processing gooseberries or currants.

Economic Considerations

Initial investments include land preparation, plant establishment, and installation of an irrigation system. The most significant investment for gooseberries and currants will be the initial plant purchase, as plants can be difficult to obtain and should be ordered well in advance. Producers should be prepared to pay up to the \$5 range per plant. Assuming a price of \$3.60 per pound (about \$5.50 per quart), establishment costs will not be fully paid back until Year 5 of production.

Current establishment costs for a one-fifth acre planting during the first three years will fall in the \$3,000 range. In a full-bearing year, production

costs are estimated at \$290 per one-fifth acre, with harvest and marketing costs at \$770. Total expenses per one-fifth acre, including both variable and fixed, would come to approximately \$1,250. Presuming gross returns of \$2,600 per one-fifth acre, returns to land, capital and management could be approximately \$1,350 per one-fifth acre. Like other properly marketed small fruit, gooseberries and currants have the potential for net returns in the \$6,000 to \$8,000 range per acre; however, Kentucky demand is not likely to support many acres of *Ribes*.

More Information

- Gooseberries and Currants (Kentucky State University, 2007)
<http://www.pawpaw.kysu.edu/PDF/pompergoosetalk07.pdf>
- Currants (California Rare Fruit Growers, 1996)
<http://www.crfg.org/pubs/ff/currants.html>
- Gooseberry (California Rare Fruit Growers, 1996)
<http://www.crfg.org/pubs/ff/gooseberry.html>