



Gooseberries & Currants

Cheryl Kaiser¹ and Matt Ernst²

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 as a value-added food item 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. Gooseberries and currants can be a way to diversify offerings at a farmers market, roadside stand, and CSA (community supported agriculture). Providing consumer education through suggested uses, recipes, and other “point-of-purchase” materials can help producers develop a more steady market for gooseberries and currants.

Market Outlook

Currants and gooseberries are minor crops in the U.S. Although currant and gooseberry acreage increased between 2007 and 2012, less than 2,500 commercial farm acres were counted in 2012, according to the U.S. Census of Agriculture. Historically, the U.S. regulated cultivation of *Ribes* species in an effort to control white pine blister rust (WPBR) mortality in pines; the WPBR fungus needs a *Ribes* plant to complete its life cycle. The federal restriction was lifted in 1966, but some states continue to restrict gooseberry and currant production. Production of *Ribes* is not restricted in Kentucky, where white pine blister rust appears to be uncommon. Producers should estimate both local production and demand before investing in producing and marketing gooseberries and currants.



GOOSEBERRIES

Preserving the berries for sale during the off-season may also be a way of diversifying a grower’s offerings and spreading the risk of production for a new crop across different target markets. Evaluations of *Ribes* cultivars for Kentucky have been made by Kentucky State University researchers, who reported market potential in Kentucky for white, red, and black currants, as well as gooseberries. Gooseberries have the greatest potential for fresh market sales. However, gooseberries also are relatively easy to grow and local supply can quickly meet consumer demand.

Production Considerations

Crop/cultivar selection and propagation

Currant types are red, white, and black; American and European gooseberries are green to yellow or red when ripe. Cultivars vary in terms of fruit characteristics and disease resistance. Consort, Coronet, Crusader, and Titania are immune to WPBR. Based on Kentucky State University research



¹Cheryl Kaiser is a former Extension Associate with the Center for Crop Diversification.

²Matt Ernst is an independent contractor with the Center for Crop Diversification.

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 within 1,000 to 3,000 feet of susceptible pines.

Currants are easily propagated by hardwood cuttings of 1-year-old wood, while tip layering is a surer method of gooseberry propagation.

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 1-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 multiple cultivars are not required for pollination.

The majority of fruit is produced on the 2- and 3-year-old shoots; canes that are 4 years or older produce very little fruit. Mature plants should be pruned annually



RED CURRANTS (INSET) AND WHITE CURRANTS

during dormancy to remove the 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.

While these crops have few serious insect pests, injury from mites and aphids can occur occasionally. Other potential pests include currant fruit fly and currant borer. In some seasons, birds can be a serious problem as fruit

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

	Resistant to WPBR ¹ and PM ²	Resistant to WPBR; not PM	Resistant to PM; not WPBR	Not resistant to WPBR nor PM
Gooseberries	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

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 in 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 two weeks. Fruit for fresh use should be picked when fully ripe and marketed promptly.

There is a time lapse of three years after planting before the first harvest is realized, with full production at four years. 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.

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 these crops.

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 \$3.50 per pound (about \$5 to \$5.50 per quart), establishment costs will not be fully paid back until Year 5 of production.

Establishment costs for a one-fifth acre planting are estimated in 2016 at \$3,500 for the first three years, including labor costs. In a full-bearing year, production costs are estimated at \$300 per one-fifth acre, with harvest and marketing costs at about \$800. Total expenses per one-fifth acre in a full-production year, including both variable and fixed, would come to approximately

\$1,750. Presuming gross returns (conservative) of \$2,500 from full production per one-fifth acre, returns to land, capital and management could be approximately \$1,000 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, especially through direct markets; however, Kentucky's current local demand is not likely to support widespread commercial plantings of *Ribes*.

Selected Resources

On the Internet

- Growing Gooseberries and Currants (Kentucky State University, 2010) 3.84 MB Powerpoint <http://www.pawpaw.kysu.edu/PDF/goosetalk02112010fin2ooo.pdf>
- Currant and Gooseberry Genetic Resources (USDA-ARS National Clonal Germplasm Repository, 2010) <http://www.ars.usda.gov/Main/docs.htm?docid=11353>
- Currant and Gooseberry Pest Diagnostic Tool (USDA-ARS National Clonal Germplasm Repository, 2000) <http://www.ars-grin.gov/cor/ribes/ribsymp/ribsymp.html>
- Currants (California Rare Fruit Growers, 1996) <http://www.crfg.org/pubs/ff/currants.html>
- Currants and Gooseberries (Purdue University, 2001) https://edustore.purdue.edu/item.asp?item_number=ho-17-w#.WECJUpIwbxU
- Gooseberries and Currants (Cornell University, 2010) <http://www.fruit.cornell.edu/mfruit/gooseberries.html>
- The Berry Diagnostic Tool (Cornell University) <http://www.fruit.cornell.edu/berrytool/>
- Gooseberries and Currants (Pennsylvania State University) <http://agsci.psu.edu/fphg/gooseberries-currants>
- Gooseberry (California Rare Fruit Growers, 1996) <http://www.crfg.org/pubs/ff/gooseberry.html>
- Nursery Guide for Berry and Small Fruit Crops (Cornell University, 2011) <https://blogs.cornell.edu/berrynurseries/>

In print

- *Currants, Gooseberries, and Jostaberries: A Guide for Growers, Marketers, and Researchers in North America.* Danny L. Barney and Kim E. Hummer. 2005. Hawthorn Press. 266 pp.

Reviewed by Sheri Crabtree, Kentucky State University *Photos courtesy of Pexels.com* **December 2016**

For additional information, contact your local **County Extension** agent

Educational programs of Kentucky Cooperative Extension serve all people regardless of economic or social status and will not discriminate on the basis of race, color, ethnic origin, national origin, creed, religion, political belief, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, pregnancy, marital status, genetic information, age, veteran status, or physical or mental disability.