

# CURRENTS, A "Berry" Good Addition To Your Garden

*By Dennis Hinkamp*

Berries are a little tricky to grow, but raspberries, blackberries, strawberries, grapes, gooseberries and currants all grow here in Northern Utah. The really dedicated gardener can even grow a blueberry or two.

One plant that is often left out of berry patches is the currant, says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist. Currants are one of those rare plants that is not only productive, but an attractive addition to the landscape throughout the year.

Currants and gooseberries both belong to the genus *Ribes*, he says. There are more than 100 different species of *Ribes* grown throughout the world and three native currants are found in our mountains.

"Golden, gooseberry and western black currants grow in our canyons and mountain areas," Goodspeed explains. "Golden currants have a soft golden-colored blossom that eventually changes to a rose color. The edible, sweet fruit varies in color from yellow to red or black. It is commonly found around streams and wet areas."

The other two currant varieties have fruit, but they lack much flavor, he says. Gooseberry currants have spines that make an intimate encounter very memorable. The fruit even has small bristles. The Western black currant is a taller shrub with white flowers and black fruit.

A number of different varieties of red currants can be grown for home use, he adds. "Red Lake," "Perfection" and "Wilder" are the most popular. There are even a couple of white varieties grown locally.

"Currants are versatile and can adapt to most soil types," Goodspeed explains. "Like most plants they prefer a well-drained, loamy soil, but tolerate heavier soils. They require little fertilizer and only have a couple of pests.

There are larva that love to munch on currant leaves throughout the summer, he warns. If the leaves appear to be eaten, apply a Bt (*Bacillus thuringiensis*) product for biological control, or use a registered insecticide. A small worm may also occasionally be found in the fruit. Just ignore it; there is not a lot that can be done.

Most plants need to be pruned annually to maintain their shape, size and fruit production, Goodspeed says. Each spring prune back the oldest one or two canes to the trunk or the ground. These cuts stimulate new growth, keep the shrub's size in check, and allow the two- and three-year-old wood to bear before it becomes old and ugly. After the wood reaches the ripe old age of four or five, the fruit production declines, and the plant starts to outgrow its own beauty.

Currants have the added bonus of being ornamental with flowers in the spring, fruit in the summer and beautiful foliage colors in the fall, he says. Incorporated into a landscape, they can act as a focal point, an informal hedge or as a background planting. Native currants are part of the spectacular color in our canyons in the fall.

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