

# European Black Currant

*Ribes nigrum* is a member of the Saxifragaceae (saxifrage) family.

The European black currant (*Ribes nigrum*) is a deciduous shrub native to northern Europe and to north and central Asia. It has stiff, upright branches that grow 5 to 6 feet tall. Flowers are borne on 1-year-old wood and on tiny spurs on older wood. Most cultivars do not require cross-pollination, but the flower structure of a few varieties prevents ready self-pollination. Black currant fruits are born in strigs, or chains, similar to but shorter than those of the red or white currant. Fruit size averages about  $\frac{3}{8}$  inch in diameter.

Because so many share a common ancestry, European black currant cultivars do not vary greatly in plant or fruit characteristics. Growers are now beginning to cross *Ribes nigrum* with other *Ribes* species in an attempt to introduce certain desirable characteristics. *Ribes bracteosum* crosses such as Jet have longer strigs of berries, *R. nigrum sibirica* and *R. dikuscha* crosses are more cold-hardy and resistant to disease, and *R. ussuriense* crosses like Consort are resistant to white pine blister rust.

Two other black currant species that have occasionally been cultivated for their fruits are the clove currant (*R. odoratum*) and the American black currant (*R. americanum*). Around 1900, clones were selected with superior fruit, but neither species is widely grown today.

European black currants (and other true currants, for that matter) are not related to the small raisins that have long been sold commercially as "dried currants" or "black currants," and which are in fact dried Black Corinth grapes.

## Market Information

The black currant is popular in northern Europe for its flavor and its high Vitamin C content. The plant and fruit are little known in America. The plant was recognized as a host for white pine blister rust, and banned from the United States in the 1920s. The ban was lifted in 1966, and American interest in rust-resistant varieties of this fruit is now growing.

**Use.** European black currant has a strong flavor. People who enjoy the flavor eat the berries out of hand. The best cultivars for fresh eating include



These full-sized, firm European black currants are ready for harvest. (Photo: Bernadine Strik)

Blackdown, Brodtop, Goliath, and Silvergieters. The fruit is also used in juice, jams, tarts, and wines.

## Culture

**Climatic requirements.** Black currants tolerate cold temperatures to  $-25^{\circ}\text{F}$  or lower, depending on the cultivar. They do not, however, tolerate extremely hot summers, particularly in conjunction with dry weather.

**Propagation and care.** Black currants thrive in cool, well-drained, fertile soils. The bush will thrive in full sun or in partial shade. In warm-summer areas, plant the bushes in partial shade or on a north-facing slope. In warm regions, bushes produce better in heavier soils that retain moisture and remain cooler. An organic mulch helps to protect the shallow roots.

Slightly acidic soils that are rich in organic matter are best. Apply nitrogen in a yearly mulch of strawy manure or fertilizer that can supply about 4 ounces of nitrogen per square yard. Potassium is needed at the rate of  $\frac{1}{2}$  ounce of actual potassium to the square yard.

Currants leaf out early in spring, so plant either very early in the spring or in the fall, with mulch to prevent heaving during the winter.

the transplants slightly deeper than they grew in the nursery. This will encourage buds and new shoots at and below ground level. You can cut off all branches to within 1 inch of the ground after planting to encourage plants to grow strong shoots and roots. The leaf canopy may develop more quickly and provide more vigor, however, if 1-year-old canes are left on the transplants. If you are planting European black currants as individual bushes, space the plants 6 feet apart; space them only 3 feet apart in a row if you want to grow them as a hedge.

Black currant bushes need annual pruning. When you prune, leave an adequate supply of 1-year-old wood to bear fruit and stimulate new shoot growth for fruit the following season. In the winter after the first growing season, prune all but six of the strongest upright shoots. In subsequent winters, cut away old shoots at ground level or shorten them to vigorous side shoots. Also remove branches that are broken, trailing on the ground, or diseased.

If currant production declines with plant age, cut off all the branches at ground level in winter. Though this will sacrifice the next season's crop, you should get a good load of European black currants the season after that on vigorous 1-year-old wood.

**Propagation.** Hardwood cuttings will root readily if each 8- to 12-inch piece is set in the ground so only the top bud is exposed. Set the cuttings in early spring or autumn. They can even be set at the end of the summer if you leave the top leaves attached and do not let plants dry out before rooting. Softwood cuttings also root easily. Three-inch tip cuttings, given shade and either mist or a clear plastic tent, will grow roots in 3 or 4 weeks.

Drooping branches of black currants often layer themselves (take root). If you only want one or two new plants, you can encourage layering by bending a low branch to the ground and covering it with some soil and a stone.

**Harvest.** Pick black currants while they are dry and still firm. Take the whole strig unless the fruit is to be used immediately. If you are picking for fresh eating, make sure the berries are fully ripe.

**Pests and diseases.** European black currant is a host for white pine blister rust, but usually is not seriously affected by the disease. Some resistant (non-host) cultivars have been developed. Some European black currant cultivars are susceptible to mildew and leaf spotting diseases, but often these diseases can be controlled by choosing the right cultivar and an auspicious planting site, and by practicing proper pruning.

## Sources

### Plants

Alexander Eppler Ltd., P.O. Box 16513, Seattle, WA 98116-0513

Edible Landscaping Nursery, Rte. 2, Box 77, Afton, VA 22920

International Ribes Association, c/o Anderson Valley Agriculture Institute, P.O. Box 130, Boonville, CA 95415

Raintree Nursery, 391 Butts Rd., Morton, WA 98356

Tolowa Nursery, 360 Stephen Way, Williams, OR 97544

Whitman Farms Nursery, 1420 Beaumont NW, Salem, OR 97304

### More information

Antonelli, A., et al. 1988. *Small fruit pests: Biology, diagnosis, and management*. Publication EB 1388, Washington State University Agricultural Communications, Pullman, WA.

Baker, Harry. 1986. *The fruit garden displayed*. Cassell Ltd., The Royal Horticultural Society, London.

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