

## Red and White Currant Update – 2017

Red and white currants grow really well here at CREC with red being especially productive. Both are tart with flavors that vary from bland to good to vegetal. White currants have been especially intriguing to orchard visitors despite the fruit project manager's stated view that they are not very tasty - a white or clear fruit is just different.

Sources say that red currants (and berry picking in general) are an integral part of Nordic life. Here in the US, most people would say that currants are too tart for fresh eating, yet that is how many are consumed in other parts of the world. At the fruit project, we have tried fresh eating and making jelly with red currants. There is often a vegetal taste which varies by cultivar and this can overwhelm what otherwise could be called a mild spiciness. The general opinion here is that there's not a special flavor to make currants stand out, yet millions of people love currants.



CREC's red currants have been used by two wineries to make wine. The wine has been fabulous with a nice fruitiness and bold red color.

Red and white currants can have spectacular production. Harvest can be easy or slightly tedious, depending on cultivar. For many cultivars, it's easy to use a stick or plastic pipe to beat the branches and knock the berries off the plants and onto sheets. For longer, bigger strigs that have at least one inch of clearance between the berries and stem, hand harvesting can be quite efficient since the strigs are produced in clusters. By hand, an efficient picker can harvest full strigs on a mature shrub in 30-45 minutes. If using a beating stick, the shrub should be cleared in 15-20 minutes. We try to pick every berry so that they don't become a source of SWD, but if you didn't care as much, you could get 85-90% of the crop off in 10 minutes.

Here are the comments made about red and white currants over the past 7 years:

**2011:** Production in these plants was very high this year with 'Rosetta' producing 10 pounds of fruit pre plant. Dakota Sun Gardens Winery made a very delicious wine with the fruit. We were pleasantly surprised as there is almost no information about wine made from red currants.

**2012:** Red currant production was excellent with production ranging from 5 to 12 pounds per plant depending on the variety. 'Red Lake' produces well, yet it is very hard to pick – the berries are on short strigs and are held close to the stems in thick clusters. It is hard to get fingers around them. The fruit project manager has a 'Red Lake' plant at home from another supplier; the taste seems similar and the strigs are much bigger and nicer to pick.

White currants had impressive production – 12 pounds per plant. Fruit use still seems unclear as these are low-flavored and tart. A winemaker successfully used red currants in 2011 and will try to use the white currants this year.

**2013:** These varieties have been highly productive since their fifth year in 2011. 'Red Lake', 'Redstart', 'Rosetta' and 'Rovada' have averaged 8 pounds of fruit per plant the past three years though 'Jhonkeer Van Tets' has been more variable. The two white currant varieties averaged 6.5, 12.5 and 7.4 pounds per plant in 2011-13. Two wineries used these currants in 2012 and both products were nice. Five years ago, there was very little complimentary information on the internet about using red currants for wine. Now there are more articles and you can find several wineries selling it.

**2014:** 'Rovada' and 'Rosetta' had nice crops (9 lbs per plant). 'Rovada' has more evenly-colored fruit but was quite tart this year. 'Jhonkeer van Tets' produced 7.5 pounds of fruit per plant and has nice long strigs of very dark red fruit. Our selection of 'Red Lake' is probably not the variety it was sold as. Its fruit is in very short, dense clusters of strigs that make it almost impossible to hand pick. We gave it away this year so that we did not have to pick it ourselves.

We learned to harvest currants efficiently this year. Unfortunately, it was on the last day of harvest! The method involves laying sheets below the plants, restraining the outer end of the branch with your hand and then striking the branch with sharp blows. We used stiff yet flexible plastic water tubing as our tool. This causes both the branch and fruit to oscillate with the result being that the fruit detaches from the strig with little damage. The fruit is in better shape than when picked by hand.

**2015:** Overall, the bloom period was April 27-May 18<sup>th</sup>; however, the cool, wet period of May 6-19 killed the blossoms and prevented any bee activity.

**2016:** Due to hail, SWD and being unprepared for the very early yet uneven ripening of the red and white currants, we lost quite a bit of this crop. 'Red Lake,' 'Redstart,' 'Blanka' and 'Swedish White' were almost a complete loss due to SWD infestation. The hail bruised and opened up fruit which then attracted SWD. We were able to harvest the three later red varieties which averaged about 10 pounds of fruit per plant. 'Blanka' has declined substantially in the last year, with one plant near death. Its fruit is quite tart and not that pleasant, so it will be removed.

**2017:** The two white currant cultivars were removed. 'Swedish White' was a relatively mild and sweet berry and has been quite productive. 'Blanka' was a tart and vegetal berry and was recently declining in vigor. In spring, several of the 'Blanka' plants suffered partial death over the winter and the decision was made to remove them. This was based on their health but also on their poor fresh flavor profile and lack of demand for the fruit, though they were used with red currants in wine. 'Swedish White' was also removed at the same time because it seemed foolish to try to attend to one variety that wasn't in demand but could be a source of SWD reproduction. Both cultivars had current borers in their canes, but red and white currant vigor does not seem as affected by this as black currants do.

In the red currants, 'Redstart' was removed. It also had declining vigor and always had lighter colored berries and leaves. It was the least productive cultivar though its flavor was alright.

## Northern Hardy Fruit Project - Yearly Production Records

	No. of plants	2009		2010		2011		2012		2013		2014		2015		2016		2017	
		Date	pounds	Date	pounds	Date	pounds	Date	pounds	Date	pounds	Date	pounds	Date	pounds	Date	pounds	Date	pounds
<b>Red Currant</b>	Jhonkheer Van Tets	x	x	11-Aug	4.7	25-Aug	17.7	16-Jul	35.3	8-Aug	17.8	30-Jul	29.8	x	x	21-Jul	42.9	21-Jul	46.1
	Red Lake	4	18.4	31-Jul	21.3	9-Aug	30.3	7/23-27	23.8	8/13	37.0	1-Aug	x	x	x	x	x	21-Jul	18.4
	Redstart	4	9.8	10-Aug	12.3	8-Aug	24.7	30-Jul	20.1	14-Aug	21.5	8-Aug	19.0	x	x	x	x	x	x
	Rosetta	4	6.4	19-Aug	8.4	17-Aug	40.4	7/23-27	34.2	8/15	31.6	8/4-11	38.7	x	x	26-Jul	20.9	3-Aug	70.5
	Rovada	4	6.0	11-Aug	10.1	17-Aug	33.3	7/23-27	48.2	8/15	37.5	12-Aug	34.8	x	x	27-Jul	52.3	31-Jul	83.6
			<b>40.6</b>		<b>56.8</b>		<b>146.4</b>		<b>161.7</b>		<b>145.4</b>		<b>122.4</b>	Freeze	<b>0.0</b>	Hail, SWD loss	<b>116.1</b>		<b>218.6</b>
<b>White Currant</b>	Blanka	4	9.1	10-Aug	18.9	26-Aug	23.5	7/27-30	49.0	14-Aug	40.4	31-Jul	30.8	x	x	22-Jul	15.0	x	x
	Swedish White	4	5.5	4-Aug	14.6	4-Aug	29	20-Jul	51.1	2-Aug	48.8	7/25-28	53.0	x	x	21-Jul	20.5	x	x
			<b>14.6</b>		<b>48.1</b>		<b>52.5</b>		<b>100.1</b>		<b>89.2</b>		<b>83.8</b>	Freeze	<b>0.0</b>	Hail, SWD loss	<b>35.5</b>		<b>0.0</b>

**Summary:** White currants have not been remarkable for flavor or taste – just looks. Red currants don't seem that attractive fresh or in jams/jellies due to tartness, a lot of firm seeds and a vegetal taste. But they make really excellent wine, both by flavor and color.

Red and white currants grow on strigs which need to be removed for use (except in wine). Beating the canes will easily knock the fruit free from the stems but will drop leaves into the catch. Little brown scales also fall into the fruit. Washing is not advisable after beating the fruit as this can make it quite soggy. Remove the gross leaf trash as best you can.

Our best advice:

**For jam/jelly:** Pick the fruit by the strig – leaving the berries and structure intact. Rinse and freeze the full strigs loosely in bags. When frozen, handle the bags of frozen fruit roughly to break the berries off of the strigs. Drop the fruit into cold water and skim the scales and empty strigs from the surface.

**For Wine:** You may do the same as above or put the whole strig into the fermenter. Or, use the fruit fresh or frozen as it was beaten off the plants. You can remove most of the leaves and little brown scales by skimming the surface of the fermenter with a strainer. Pectinase will help extract the juice from the berries.

