New Hampshire
Department of Agriculture, Markets & Food

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Currants & Gooseberries Return to New Hampshire Gardens

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New approved disease resistant varieties of currants and gooseberries bring a renewed interest and hope for berry crop growers in New Hampshire. Currants and gooseberries are very closely related species of the genus *Ribes*. *Ribes*, once common in the natural environment is also the alternate host for White pine blister rust fungus (*Cronartium ribicola*) (WPBR), considered to be one of the most destructive diseases of White pine (*Pinus strobus*) and all other 5-needled pines in North America.

WPBR originated in Asia and became established in Europe in the 18th century after highly susceptible American white pines were widely planted. The disease was introduced into North America about 1900 on white pine seedlings grown in European nurseries for national re-forestation efforts. By the 1950s it had spread to most of the commercial white pine regions resulting in significant losses.

White pine blister rust requires two alternate host plants, white pine and *Ribes*, it cannot survive on one without the other. Its lifecycle begins in May and progresses through late summer when the underside *Ribes* leaves become infected with tiny orange blister-like fruiting bodies, which produce spores that maintain the fungal disease on the *Ribes*. Other spore-bearing structures appear in August and early September that the needles and twigs of White pine forming blisters that rupture the bark in early spring two or three years after being infected. Its only when the fungus finds its way beneath the bark of the pine that it becomes lethal.

In 1912, federal and state governments introduced restrictions on the importation, planting, and cultivation of *Ribes* species to prevent the spread of WPBR. Shortly there after, a federal law was passed banning all *Ribes* species and was followed by a national eradication effort to eliminate stands of both native and cultivated plantings. Although these efforts greatly reduced the spread of WPBR, it still remains a constant threat to this day. In 1966, the federal law was revoked; however, many states, including New Hampshire, still retain their laws and quarantines.

Over the past several years the importance of *Ribes* for berry crop production has led to the development of many new WPBR resistant varieties, several of which were recently approved for cultivation in New Hampshire by the NH Department of Agriculture, Markets & Food (DAMF), and by the NH Department of Resources & Economic Development (DRED). The list now includes 10 Currants (8 black, 1 red, and 1 white); 1 black and red Currant hybrid cross; and 8 Gooseberries. A complete listing of all approved *Ribes* can be found at the DAMF's website. Before purchasing or importing any of the approved Ribes, a Special Permit shall be submitted to DRED. The permit may also be obtained on our website.

All *Ribes* are long-lived perennial shrubs that are cold hardy, some to USDA Zone 2. Species and cultivars vary in plant size and form, but are usually upright to spreading (3-6') in height and width. Mildew resistance is variable, depending on the cultivar. The fruit are edible and very nutritious with some currants being especially high in vitamin C. Fruit within species vary in appearance, ease of harvest, flavor, shape, size, texture, and color.

For more information contact the Division of Plant Industry at NH Dept. of Agriculture, Markets & Food, PO Box 2042, Concord, NH 03302-2042, tel. 271-3488, or visit www.agriculture.nh.gov.

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