



Gooseberries and Currants

Gooseberries and currants are shrubby plants that bear edible fruit and belong to the genus *Ribes*. Eleven species are native to Arizona. In general, gooseberry plants are spiny while currant plants tend not to be armed with spines. In the wild, these species are found in forests, woodlands, canyons, and riparian areas at elevations ranging from 4,000 to 11,500 feet. The fruits and leaves are used for food and medicinal purposes by Native Americans (and ethnobotanists and wild crafters) and plants are browsed by wildlife and domestic livestock. Birds and wildlife also eat the berries. The flowers contain nectar which makes them attractive to both hummingbirds and butterflies.

Gooseberries and currants are deciduous with small, lobed leaves that usually turn red in the fall. Through the ages, gooseberries and currants have been selected and bred to produce larger, tastier fruits. There are several cultivated varieties which are popular among gardeners.

We have two common native currant species in Yavapai County. Golden currant (*Ribes aureum*) is the most common native species available in nurseries. It has fragrant tubular yellow flowers and is a very attractive landscape plant that grows up to 8 feet tall. Ripe fruits are black or red. This is the best adapted species for lower elevations areas like Sedona and cooler areas on the Verde Valley. Once established, it is somewhat drought tolerant. Wax currant (*Ribes cereum*) has white to pink tubular flowers. The fruits are red to dark red. The leaves are not as smooth as those of golden currant and are darker green. This species is usually found in pine forests and is not as widely available in local nurseries. Both produce small edible berries. Birds are fond of currants and can “plant” seeds.



Ribes aureum; Yavapai County Native and Naturalized Plant Database; photo by Doug McMillan.

Gooseberries and currants have a dubious past because they are the alternate host species of white pine blister rust: a fungal disease that affects five-needle pines such as western white pine and sugar pine. Many rust diseases rely on two host plant species to complete their life cycle (another example is cedar apple rust). Efforts to control white pine blister rust have ranged from hand-controlling *Ribes* to breeding rust resistant varieties of desirable pine species. White pine blister rust is still on the move in the southwest where it affects southwestern white pine (*Pinus strobiformis*). In Arizona, southwestern white pine is found in the mountains between 6,500 and 10,000 foot elevations and its range overlaps with several species of *Ribes*. There are no restrictions on the planting of gooseberries or currants in Arizona.

Cultivated varieties of gooseberry and currant plants are available by mail order and may perform well here where soils are not excessively alkaline. Planting white pine blister rust resistant cultivars is recommended.

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Adapted from original Backyard Gardener publications by Jeff Schalau, Agent, Agriculture & Natural Resources, University of Arizona Cooperative Extension, Yavapai County

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