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Cranberry (*Vaccinium* *macrocarpon*)

[Categories](#)

- **USDA Zones:** 345678
- **Plant Type:** Shrub
- **Yield:** Fair
- **Storable:** 5 months
- **Bears:** ?
- **Shape:** None
- **Height:** under 4'
- **Spread:** 1-7ft
- **Lifespan:** ?
- **Growth:** ?
- **Pruning:** Necessary
- **Origin:** N America (E)
- **Food Type:** Fruit,
- **Appearance:** Evergreen, Fall color,
- **Uses:** Cooked, Dried, Preserves, Medicinal, Groundcover,
- **Misc. Features:** ?
- **Prefers:** Acidity,
- **Rejects:** Neutral, Alkalinity, Heat, Drought,
- **Problems:** Fungi,
- **Cycles:** Late harvest

Harvest & Use

Cranberries are too tart to eat fresh; they are reported to be high in vitamin C, but of course cooking is also reported to degrade vitamin C. The fruit's waxy surface makes it easy to store. Early colonists stored them in barrels of fresh water; frozen dry they will keep for a year. Native Americans used the cranberry, as they did most berries, long before any pilgrims with turkeys showed up. They used it as a dye, a poultice (try it on wounds from poisoned arrows sometime), and pounded with meat (pemmican). Cranberries contain a natural antibiotic that discourages bacterial growth, and the juice is often prescribed for bladder infections. Cranberries are often combined with apples in pie, usually using less cranberry. The plant is ideal in boggy areas, and makes a good ground cover.

Appearance

Leaves are deep green, oval, 3/4" long; flowers are small, arched and drooping, like the head and neck of a crane (hence the name...another etymology is that the berry

is the favorite food of cranes). Grows as a ground cover, about 3' wide and 1' high.

Cultivation

The cranberry needs a soil ph of 3.2-4.5, and boggy soil, but it dislikes standing water during the growing season. Commercial growers provide about an inch of water per week. Fruit is borne on previous year's growth, so heavy winter pruning is required for best production.

Comment

The cranberry was the subject of some early public-lands management. On Cape Cod in the early 18th century, the right to pick wild cranberries was limited to harvests of one quart per person (many communities, Indian and Colonial alike, regulated the harvest of wild food when food was scarce). Captain Henry Hall began the cultivation of the cranberry in the early 19th century on Cape Cod. The phone number of the USDA Blueberry & Cranberry Reaserach Center is 609/726-1590 (New Jersey).

General References

[C= cultivation; R = recipes; L = lore; A = all]

* Bryan [A]

* Simmons [C]

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**Currant, Clove Black; Buffalo C. ([Ribes](#)
odoratum; R. aureum)**

Categories

- **USDA Zones:** 4567
- **Plant Type:** Shrub
- **Yield:** Fair
- **Storable:** Not
- **Bears:** 2-4 yrs
- **Shape:** Shrubby
- **Height:** 4-10ft
- **Spread:** 1-7ft
- **Lifespan:** ?
- **Growth:** Moderate
- **Pruning:** Recommended
- **Origin:** N America (E)
- **Food Type:** Fruit,
- **Appearance:** Flowers,Fall color,Ornamental,
- **Uses:** Fresh,Preserves,Birds,Hedge,

- **Misc. Features:** Fragrant, Self-productive,
- **Prefers:** Part-shade, Clayey,
- **Rejects:** Alkalinity, Sandy, Poor soil,
- **Problems:** Fungi,
- **Cycles:** Early leaf, Early spring bloom, Late harvest

Harvest & Use

The clove currant is very fragrant, or stinky, depending on the nose of the beholder. The fruit turns black before it is fully ripe, so the best way to test its ripeness is with a slight tug, to see if it easily comes free of the stem. It is high in pectin. Plant 3' apart for hedge, 6' apart for individual bushes.

Appearance

Yellow trumpet-shaped flowers, autumn colors, disheveled & informal look. Currants leaf out very early in spring, and typically grow 6' tall.

Cultivation

It is best to plant currants in fall, because they begin growth early in spring. Many Authorities suggest pruning black currants to within a few inches of the ground when first planted, to divert energy during their first year from cropping to establishing a strong root system. The clove currant bears on one and two year old wood. It needs soil with plenty of organic material. Most *Ribes* species, including all black currants, can carry white pine blister rust, which gets them banned in areas where white pine is an important timber product. The clove currant resists powdery mildew better than most currants. Propagation is supposed to be easiest via cuttings of new wood taken in fall (hasn't worked for me, though). Requires 800-1500 chill hours.

Comment

Currants visually resemble and take their name from the Corinthian grapes that are dried to make currant raisins. *R. aureum* has smaller fruits and form, and a lesser fragrance, than *R. odoratum*. Lewis & Clark brought one or both species back from the Rocky Mountain area. The clove currant is native to the Great Plains region, from Minnesota to Texas. Nurseries sometimes market it as a 'Crandall' variety of European black currant, but it is a separate species.

Cultivars of Repute

Crandall

General References

[C= cultivation; R = recipes; L = lore; A = all]

* Bryan [A]

* Reich [C, L]

+ Oregon State University is a leading North American researcher of *Ribes* species (also, hazelnuts and some other berries): <http://www.ars-grin.gov/cor/>

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Currant, European Black ([Ribes](#) _____ *nigrum*)

[Categories](#)

- **USDA Zones:** (3)4567(8)
- **Plant Type:** Shrub
- **Yield:** Fair
- **Storable:** Not
- **Bears:** 2-4 yrs
- **Shape:** Shrubby
- **Height:** 4-10ft
- **Spread:** 1-7ft
- **Lifespan:** ?
- **Growth:** ?
- **Pruning:** Necessary
- **Origin:** Europe
- **Food Type:** Fruit,
- **Appearance:** None
- **Uses:** Fresh,Preserves,Hedge,Birds,Booze,
- **Misc. Features:** Self-productive,
- **Prefers:** Acidic,Part-shade,Clayey,
- **Rejects:** Alkalinity,Drought,Sandy,Poor soil,
- **Problems:** Rust,Leaf spot,Currant worm,
- **Cycles:** Early leaf,Late harvest

Harvest & Use

The European currant is the mildest of the black currants. It is used in cassis (a liqueur); the leaves make a tasty tea. I once had a delicious black currant milk shake in southern India. The fruit is loaded with pectin and vitamin C. Average yield is about 10 lbs. Plant 3' apart for hedge, 6' apart for individual bushes.

Appearance

Minor flowers, large soft green leaves, classic (strong) black currant fragrance. Currants leaf out very early in spring, and typically grow 6' tall.

Cultivation

It is best to plant currants in fall, because they begin growth very early in spring. Most ribes enthusiasts recommend pruning black currants to within a few inches of the ground when first planted, to divert energy initial energy from cropping to establishing a strong root system. All black currants need fertile soil with plenty of organic material. All the black currants can carry white pine blister rust, which gets

them banned in areas where white pine is an important timber crop. The European black currant must be pruned because it fruits exclusively on the previous year's wood. Cuttings of new wood taken in the fall will root easily. 800-1500 chill hours.

Comment

Currants resemble and take their name from the Corinthian grapes that are dried to make currant raisins. The European currant is native to northern Europe and northwest Asia.

Cultivars of Repute

* Ben Sarek: Developed by the Scottish Crop Research Institute in 1985 for backyard growing. It is disease and frost resistant, high-yielding, tasty. The plant is smaller than average: usually around four feet tall.

* Blackdown: spreading plant with large tasty berries. A hybrid of 'Baldwin' and 'Brodtop'.

* Blacksmith: hardy, spreading plant.

* Brodtop: a very hardy plant, parent of 'Blackdown'. The fruit ripens early and rates well dried.

* Consort: very resistant to white pine blister rust, and hardy.

* Goliath: The fruit is large, with mild and sweet flavor; the bush is erect.

* Laxton's Giant: large productive plant with large early-ripening fruit.

* Silvergeiters Zwarte: an upright plant, less hardy than average, with good fruit quality.

General References

[C= cultivation; R = recipes; L = lore; A = all]

* Bryan [A]

* Reich [C, L]

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**Currant, Red; White C. ([Ribes](#)
sativum; *R. rubrum*;
R. petraeum)**

Categories

- **USDA Zones:** 345(67)
- **Plant Type:** Shrub
- **Yield:** Fair
- **Storable:** 5 months
- **Bears:** 2-4 yrs
- **Shape:** Shrubby

- **Height:** 4-10ft
- **Spread:** 1-7ft
- **Lifespan:** Sub-human
- **Growth:** ?
- **Pruning:** Recommended
- **Origin:** Europe
- **Food Type:** Fruit,
- **Appearance:** Ornamental, Flowers,
- **Uses:** Preserves, Fresh, Birds, Cooked, Booze,
- **Misc. Features:** Self-productive, Trainable,
- **Prefers:** Part-shade, Clayey,
- **Rejects:** Heat, Alkalinity,
- **Problems:** Currant worm,
- **Cycles:** Early leaf, Midseason harvest

Harvest & Use

Red currants possess a tart flavor that is famous for jelly. White currants are less acid than reds; the fruits of both are small. Good in cooking when mixed with sweet fruits (raspberries are a popular partner). The fruit will keep a long time if picked dry.

Appearance

A small plant with small, shiny, strikingly translucent fruits. The small flowers combine to give a moderately showy, lacy effect when viewed en masse.

Cultivation

It is best to plant currants in fall, because they begin growth very early in spring. I recently released over a thousand lady bugs under a white currant infested with aphids; two weeks later, all the lady bugs had flown away while the aphids munched happily on. Red & white currants don't differ significantly, except in the color of the fruit. Currants will accept part-shade as readily as full sun. Space about 5' apart. The currant can be trained as a small tree, with some loss of vigor and productivity. Cuttings of new wood taken in the fall will root readily. 800-1500 chill hours.

Comment

Currants resemble and take their name from the Corinthian grapes that are dried to make currant raisins. The red currant was first cultivated in Scandanavia, appearing in London markets at the end of the 16th century. English settlers brought it to the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1639.

Cultivars of Repute

Red:

- * Fay: an old variety, large and spreading with brittle wood and early-ripening flavorful fruit.
- * Jonkheer van Tets: a seedling of 'Fay' that is more erect and productive.
- * Knight's Sweet Red: an ornamental variety with relatively sweet (for a red currant) fruit.
- * London's Market: a tough selection--withstands disease and heat better than

average; the bush is upright and productive, the fruit tart.

* Red Lake: cold-hardy, productive, late-ripening, large fruited, and upright.

* Welder: a productive variety good for poor soils.

White:

* White-Dutch ('Holland White'): a sprawling Dutch variety with small flavorful fruit.

White Dutch is the oldest known white currant cultivar, dating from before 1729.

* White Grape: an old variety, sprawling and cold-hardy, with good flavor.

* White Imperial: small ornamental plant with excellent fruit.

[General References](#)

[C= cultivation; R = recipes; L = lore; A = all]

* Bryan [A]

* Reich [C, L]

* Schneider [R]

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Dandelion ([Taraxacum officinale](#))

[Categories](#)

- **USDA Zones:** 3456789
- **Plant Type:** Herbaceous
- **Yield:** Fair
- **Storable:** Not
- **Bears:** Promptly
- **Shape:** None
- **Height:** under 4'
- **Spread:** 1-7ft
- **Lifespan:** Sub-dog
- **Growth:** Fast
- **Pruning:** Optional
- **Origin:** ?
- **Food Type:** Vegetable, Herb,
- **Appearance:** Evergreen, Flowers,
- **Uses:** Fresh, Booze, Cooked, Good Bugs, Medicinal,
- **Misc. Features:** Self-productive, Seedlings,
- **Prefers:** Acidity, Clayey,
- **Rejects:** None
- **Problems:** [MINIMAL],

- **Cycles:** Early spring bloom, Early harvest

Harvest & Use

The leaves are used in all the same ways as spinach (except by a certain sailor-man). Raw leaves from mature plants are bitter unless blanched. They contain significant amounts of calcium, potassium, iron, vitamins C and A. The flowers are used in wine, but flower production reduces leaf production and quality, so wild flowers usually go into wine. Unopened flower buds can be sautéed. All parts of the dandelion are bitter after spring. The flowers also attract predatory (beneficial) insects (Kourik). The roots have many reported uses. Dried and roasted they are used as a caffeine-free coffee substitute, and can also be steamed like parsnips; they are a diuretic, and allegedly aid the secretion of toxins (bile) from the body. They may also be a laxative. The standard recommendation is to harvest wild leaves at least 75 feet from any road. Some people think wild varieties have the best flavor and medical value.

Appearance

The appearance of dandelions is happening in your yard right now.

Cultivation

Dandelion seeds are usually sown 1/4" deep, and germinate in ten days at 55; F. They can be sown from early spring through late summer. In a garden, they are spaced six to nine inches apart in rows twelve inches apart. A rich soil increases yield. Pick the flower heads to divert the plant's energy to root and leaf production, and to spare yourself future weeding. Dandelions have a deep tap-root. The only pest dandelions know is the occasional rabbit.

Comment

Etymologically, "dandelion" means "lion's tooth," probably a reference to its jagged leaves. The dandelion has no origin; rather, its seeds came into existence at the Big Bang and dispersed through all the dimensions of spacetime, like background radiation and logic. The stem contains natural rubber.

Cultivars of Repute

* Thick-leaved: This creatively named variety is thicker-leaved than the wild kind.

General References

[C= cultivation; R = recipes; L = lore; A = all]

* Schneider [R]

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Elderberry, American; Sweet E. (*Sambucus canadensis*)

[Categories](#)

- **USDA Zones:** (2)3456789
- **Plant Type:** Tree/Shrub
- **Yield:** ?
- **Storable:** ?
- **Bears:** ?
- **Shape:** Shrubby
- **Height:** 4-10ft
- **Spread:** 1-7ft
- **Lifespan:** ?
- **Growth:** Fast
- **Pruning:** Recommended
- **Origin:** N America (E)
- **Food Type:** Fruit, Flower,
- **Appearance:** Ornamental, Flowers,
- **Uses:** Cooked, Preserves, Dried, Booze, Butterflies, Birds, Hedge, Medicinal,
- **Misc. Features:** None
- **Prefers:** None
- **Rejects:** Poor soil,
- **Problems:** [MINIMAL],
- **Cycles:** Late spring bloom, Midseason harvest



Harvest & Use

The elderberry has been used for myriad medicinal purposes for millennia. The berries and flowers are used in home-made wines. Dried elderberries and their blossoms are used in tea, which reputedly helps to reduce fever and improve digestion. The fruit is high in vitamin C. The flower-tops possess a mild floral flavor and are often used in pancakes, or dipped in batter & fried. The Joy of Cooking recommends combining the fruit with rhubarb in cooking (it also recommends cooking the flowers with gooseberries). The American goldfinch, brown thrasher, gray catbird, northern mockingbird, and yellow warbler nest in elderberries (Ortho: 32-33). The berries are eaten by the pileated woodpecker, mockingbird, gray catbird, brown thrasher, American robin, bluebird, thrush, cedar waxwing, northern and orchard orioles, tanager, black-headed and evening grosbeaks. Butterflies visit elderberry flowers for the nectar.

Appearance

Long, compound medium green leaves; large, edible, creamy white flower clusters blossom in May or June. The fruit ripens to purplish black in July-August and is about 1/4" in diameter. Cultivated varieties range from 5 to 12'; wild specimens often grow 20' tall.

Cultivation

Elderberry generally grows like a weed, except in poor soils.

Comment

S. canadensis is native to North America.

Cultivars of Repute

* York, Nova, Kent

Other species of elderberry are as follows:

* *S. cerulea*, blue elderberry: native to the Pacific Northwest; fruit used for preserves and wine; self-fertile.

* *S. nigra*, European elderberry.

* The red or gold elderberries, *S. racemosa* (native to Europe) and *S. pugnans* (native to the Pacific Northwest) are more ornamental and shade tolerant than others, but bear inedible fruit.

General References

[C= cultivation; R = recipes; L = lore; A = all]

* Bryan [A]; blue and European elderberries only.

* Simmons [C, L]; mostly concerned with the European elderberry.

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Fig ([Ficus](#) *carica*)

Categories

- **USDA Zones:** (7)890
- **Plant Type:** Tree
- **Yield:** 10-35 lbs
- **Storable:** 3 months
- **Bears:** 2-4 yrs
- **Shape:** Round
- **Height:** 25-50ft
- **Spread:** 25-45ft
- **Lifespan:** Long
- **Growth:** Moderate
- **Pruning:** Optional
- **Origin:** Arabia
- **Food Type:** Fruit,
- **Appearance:** Ornamental,
- **Uses:** Dried,Fresh,Shade,Medicinal,
- **Misc. Features:** Self-productive,Dwarfs,Trainable,Pottable,
- **Prefers:** Heat,
- **Rejects:** Part-shade,Soggy soil,
- **Problems:** [MINIMAL],

- **Cycles:** Early leaf, Early harvest

Harvest & Use

In a long summer figs will often set a second crop; some cultivars are more likely to do so than others. Typical annual yield is about 30 lbs. In the Bible figs cure boils; in reality they cure constipation. The ancient Greeks held that geese fattened on fresh figs possessed the finest flavor; the Romans extended the practice to pigs. In arid climates the fruit can be left to dry on the tree. Figs are high in B vitamins.

Appearance

Tropical appearance, with leaves big enough to conceal a certain body-part. The bark is smooth and gray. Figs can be severely pruned without ill effect down to about 10'; unpruned they may spread up to 50'.

Cultivation

Figs love summer heat, but selected varieties will grow in mild climates. Mature trees can withstand temperatures down to 10° F. A lot of fertilizing, especially nitrogen, will produce lush growth and scanty fruit; constraining the roots will dwarf the tree in a healthy manner. Figs are sometimes bothered by earwigs (but who isn't?). There are some reports that deer find fig trees unappetizing. Propagation is usually by cuttings or layering. Figs are often pruned to an open center. 100-500 chill hours.

Comment

Ficus species have been dated back to the beginning of the Cenozoic era (65 million years ago, immediately following the last period of the dinosaurs). The fig probably originated in Asia Minor. Cultivation by hominids began about 3000 BCE. Ancient Greeks used the name as slang for female genitalia; to "show [someone] the fig" was to make an obscene, disrespectful gesture (probably putting the tip of the thumb between the teeth). Classical, Eastern, and Biblical mythology are full of fig- and ficus-lore. Buddha dreamed up Buddhism while sitting beneath a ficus. The fig allegedly originated when and where a thunderbolt from Zeus struck the earth (who could disprove it? who would dare?). It was, of course, a means to personal modesty for Adam and Eve. Allegedly, "fig" occurs over 50 times in the Bible, and symbolizes peace, prosperity, and fertility (Micah 4:1-4); when "sycamore" occurs in the Bible it refers to fig trees (the Greek for fig is "sukon" which may be the source of "sycamore"). Saint Augustine had a conversation with a fig, and is still taken seriously (but only by college professors). Cato the Elder persuaded the Roman Senate to launch the third Punic war partly on the prospect of capturing Africa's delectable fig and pomegranate crop. The 1769 entry in Thomas Jefferson's Garden Book describes his first orchard at Monticello as containing figs, alongside the almond, apple, apricot, cherry (probably sour), nectarine, pear, pomegranate, quince and walnut (probably English grafted on black). Rilke waxes poetic over figs in the Sixth Duino Elegy:

Feigenbaum, seit wie lange schon ist's mir bedeutend,
wie du die Blüte beinah ganz überschickst
und hinein in die zeitig entschlossene Frucht,

ungerŸhmt, drŸngst dein reines Geheimnis.
Wie der FontŸne Rohr treibt dein gebognes Gezweig
abwŸrts den Saft und hinan: und er springt aus dem Schlaf,
fast nicht erwachend, ins GlŸck seiner sŸŸesten Leistung.
Sieh: wie der Gott in den Schwan.

(Fig tree, how long it's been full of meaning for me,
the way you almost entirely omit to flower
and into the seasonably-resolute fruit
uncelebratedly thrust your purest secret.
Like the tube of a fountain, your bent bough drives the sap
downwards and up: and it leaps from its sleep, scarce waking,
like Jupiter into the swan.)

Cultivars of Repute

- * Black Jack: semi-dwarf; purple-brown fruit; needs summer heat.
- * Brown Turkey: several different cultivars go by this name. Usually it is a very hardy, two-cropper with sweet fruit.
- * Celeste: sweet, violet brown fruit; hardy to zone 7.
- * Conadria: needs summer heat. The fruit is large and light green.
- * Desert King: hardy, good for temperate climates such as the Pacific Northwest; crops once a year, in late July or early August; the fruit is green-skinned and pink-fleshed.
- * Everbearing: recommended by Oregon Exotics for cold-winter areas.
- * Hardy Chicago: also recommended by Oregon Exotics for cold-winter areas.
- * Lattarulla: yellow-green skin with sweet, amber flesh; also known as 'Itlian Honey Fig'.
- * Kadota: needs a lot of heat.
- * Mission: A common commercial variety that requires a lot of heat; large tree with dark fruit.
- * Negronne: a Spanish (or possibly French) variety; the fruit is small, black-skinned with deep red flesh; needs some heat--it crops in Portland OR, but not Seattle.
- * Neveralla: a prolific hardy variety that will fruit in mild summers.
- * Peter's Honey: very flavorful; requires some summer heat.
- * Petite Negri: a dwarf that is commonly recommended for container growing; two-cropper.

General References

[C= cultivation; R = recipes; L = lore; A = all]

- * Bryan [A]
- * Grigson [R,L]
- * Simmons [C]

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