

BWSR Featured Plant species

Name: Native currants (*Ribes species*)

Plant family: Gooseberry (*Grossulariaceae*)



From left: Currant flowers are a high-priority food source for the endangered rusty patched bumblebee. This is wild black currant, *Ribes americanum*. **Photo Credit:** Peter Dzuik, Minnesota Wildflowers
Gooseberries are related plants with prickly stems. Only one currant, prickly currant (*Ribes lacustre*) has similar stems. This is prickly gooseberry, *Ribes cynosbati*. **Photo Credit:** Peter Dzuik, Minnesota Wildflowers
Currants typically have many flowers in clusters called racemes. The racemes of this skunk currant (*Ribes glandulosum*) are upright. Other species have drooping racemes. **Photo Credit:** Mark Garland, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service Plants Database
In contrast to currants, gooseberries have few flowers per cluster, typically one to three. This is Missouri gooseberry, *Ribes missouriense*. **Photo Credit:** Katy Chayka, Minnesota Wildflowers

Minnesota’s five species of native currants are small or medium shrubs found throughout the state, typically in wet or moist soils of both upland and lowland habitats. They are

related to gooseberries. But, with the exception of one species, currants lack bristles, prickles or spines on their stems. They provide food, cover and habitat for a variety of wildlife.

Plant Stats

STATEWIDE WETLAND INDICATOR STATUS (Midwest):

Ribes lacustre, prickly currant: **FACW**
Ribes americanum, wild black currant: **FACW**
Ribes hudsonianum, northern black currant: **OBL**
Ribes glandulosum, skunk currant: **FACW**
Ribes triste, red currant: **OBL**

PRIMARY USES:
 Wildlife and pollinator benefits, landscaping

Identification

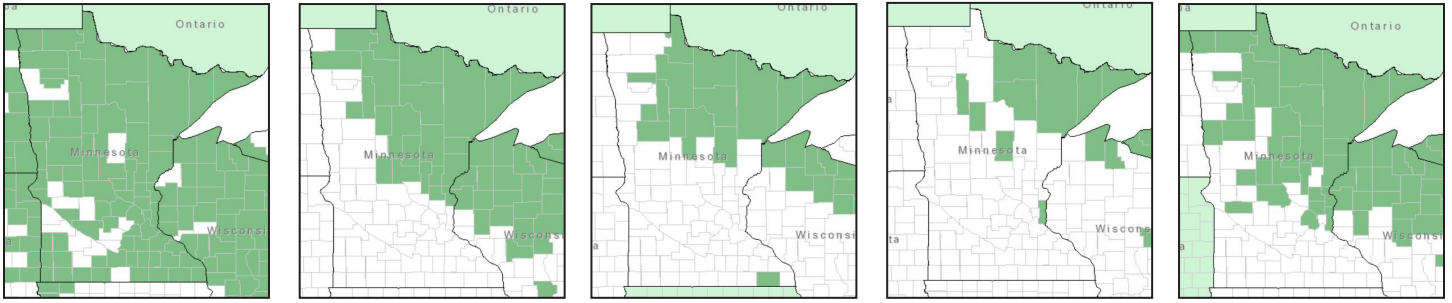
Currants are shrubs with upright, arching or sprawling stems that grow 3 to 8 feet tall. Except for prickly currant (*Ribes lacustre*) they have smooth stems, although new growth may be hairy. Leaves are alternate, attached singly to the stem, with three to five palmate lobes and toothed margins. Some species

have small, yellow resin glands on one or both leaf surfaces. Currants bloom from May to June with two to 18 five-parted flowers in upright, arching or drooping clusters. Fruits are red or blue-black berries a quarter-inch to a half-inch in diameter, some with glandular hairs, maturing from June to September.



Currants are shrubs with alternate, palmately lobed leaves. Depending on the species, the margin has pointed or rounded teeth. This is wild black currant, *Ribes americanum*. **Courtesy photo**

Range



From left: Wild black currant, *Ribes americanum*; Skunk currant, *Ribes glandulosum*; Northern black currant, *Ribes hudsonianum*; Prickly currant, *Ribes lacustre*; Swamp red currant, *Ribes triste* **Map Credits:** USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service's Plants Database

Native currants are found throughout Minnesota. Wild black currant (*Ribes americanum*) is common and

widespread. Other species' ranges are limited primarily to northern counties. All prefer wet or moist habitats,

including lakeshores, riverbanks, marshes, hardwood swamps, conifer bogs or moist upland forests.

Planting Recommendations

Currants prefer wet or moist locations with full or partial sun. They will multiply by seed and may form thickets by tip-rooting or layering along sprawling stems. Bareroot seedlings should be planted in spring. Potted shrubs should be planted from spring to mid-summer. To prevent leaf spot and other fungal diseases, plants should be spaced 5 to 6 feet apart to improve air circulation. Only a few nurseries carry native currants. Check the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources' list of native plant suppliers for details. Currants and

gooseberries are intermediate hosts for white pine blister rust, a fungal disease that can kill white pine (*Pinus strobus*) and other five-needled pines. To reduce the risk of infection, look for native species or their cultivars that are resistant to the disease. American black currant (*Ribes americanum*), for example, has a lower risk of infection. Many cultivars available at nurseries are developed from the European black currant (*Ribes nigrum*) or red currant (*Ribes rubrum*). Although these cultivars may be disease resistant, native species are preferred for greater pollinator benefit.

Uses

Currants provide food and cover for mammals and birds. Their flowers provide nectar and pollen for many pollinators. The shrubs are a high-priority food source for Minnesota's state bee, the federally endangered

rusty patched bumblebee. Currants also are used in windbreaks. They're planted in landscapes for their fall color. Fruits are edible. Some species, primarily of European origin, are grown commercially.

Similar Species

Gooseberries are similar. But, unlike most currants, their stems have bristles, prickles or spines. Gooseberry flowers and fruits are in clusters of one to four, whereas currants are in clusters of two to 18.

References

- Trees and Shrubs of Minnesota, by Welby Smith. Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, 2008
 Wetland Plants of Minnesota, Second Edition, by Steve W. Chadde. A Bogman Guide, 2012
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