

Ribes: A View from the Other Side

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SUMMARY. In North America for many years the commonly held solution to white pine blister rust (*Cronartium ribicola* J.C. Fischer) (WPBR) was to eradicate all currants and gooseberries (*Ribes* L.). That approach was tried to no avail. Can currants and gooseberries be successfully grown in North America? You bet they can! Vast areas of the United States and Canada are ideal for *Ribes* production. Black currants (*Ribes nigrum* L.) are a processed fruit and production may compare to that of grain. Many of the areas that presently grow other berries could easily grow *Ribes*. The main barriers for production in North America are state restrictions and the availability of up-to-date information and data for growers, processors, legislators and the consuming public. I suggest that this conference and the people herein form that task group and initiate the cooperative dialogue and set forth a process to approach the WPBR problem in a holistic manner.

For most of the past century the commonly held solution to WPBR was to eradicate all *Ribes*. That approach was tried to no avail. The world production of currants and gooseberries in 1998 was a little more than 750,000 t (826,720 ton). Germany, Poland and the Russian Federation produce a little more than 600,000 t (661,376 ton) or about 80 % of this (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 1999). North America did not even show up on the list. Can currants and gooseberries be successfully grown in North America? You bet they can! Vast areas of the United States and Canada are ideal for *Ribes* production. Black currant production should not be compared to strawberry (*Fragaria x ananassa* Duschesne) or raspberry (*Rubus idaeus* L.) production, which are much more labor intensive. Black currants are a processed fruit and may compare more closely to grain production than to that of most berries. *Ribes* can be machine harvested; they don't have to be planted each year; they come into production in a relatively short time; they require a minimal amount of input after the initial planting. Judging from what I have seen in this country, I believe that American plantings will have a higher per acre production than those in Europe. Many of the areas that presently grow berries are within the ideal growing locations and processors could easily expand the *Ribes* fresh fruit market. The potential for a market in North America is enormous. Black currant juice has an intense pleasant flavor and color, and is high in ascorbic acid and several other nutrients. Consumers are buying more healthful and unusual fruit and foods, and the black currant is considered a very healthful fruit.

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Black currant is a very useful product that may have a myriad of purported curative and preventative properties. It is said to cure warts, freckles, colds, rashes, sore throats, runny noses, urinary problems, heart trouble, high blood pressure, hangovers, cancer and makes child birth a pleasure. I won't vouch for these claims, but it is a replacement for all medicines and snake oil. Seriously, there are many references to the nutraceutical values of this plant and this really needs to have a thorough scientific evaluation. Black currants and their seeds contain significant levels of omega-6 PUFA, gamma-linolenic acid (GLA) and other antioxidants that are very beneficial to health. This nutraceutical aspect will only be examined by having an ample supply of North American fruit. Scandinavians and eastern Europeans are well aware of these values.

Barriers to *Ribes* production

The main barrier that needs to be addressed is the legislation against *Ribes* that is in place in many states and jurisdictions. Up-to-date information concerning *Ribes* production is not available for legislators, growers, processors, or the consuming public. There is an urgent need to explore, define and disseminate factual information and recommendations in order that realistic decisions can be made. This conference is the beginning of an effort to address these issues. Officials charged with the responsibility of pro-

tecting our natural resources must have adequate data to make decisions. When the original restrictions were imposed no WPBR-resistant *Ribes* were available. Times have changed. Now several very good black currant cultivars are either WPBR immune or resistant. Pines have also been selected for WPBR resistance. Some of the states are reviewing their legislated restrictions. This is a lengthy, costly, and difficult task. Some states just want to keep the present statute. The time has come to deliberate on these restrictions according to new information. A decision to do nothing maintains the status quo.

The plan: What to do next

Everyone has a fair share of responsibilities in this matter. The horticulturists, growers and the fruit industry must seek, find, evaluate and authenticate the validity of useful selections that are, in fact, resistant. There must be a concerted effort to breed and select cultivars that do no harm, yet are useful to the industry.

The foresters and those in the business of growing pines (*Pinus* L.) need to seek and utilize resistant selections and to use cultural practices that minimize or break the cycle. This may include removing infected trees.

Conservationists, protectors, and legislators must seek factual reliable information and data to use in making decisions that will minimize the impact on both industries and yet provide reasonable protection to all concerned.

The task and the task force

A task group should be formed to facilitate the collection, evaluation and dissemination of information and data. This multidisciplinary group could coordinate research efforts and make recommendations to interested parties. This group should have access to data from any source generating factual, pertinent findings. A World Wide Web site is available to post and to seek information (McKay, 1998). Do legislators use this site? This group could become a clearinghouse of information. This assemblage could be made up of people that are interested in the overall problem of WPBR. I suggest that a subcommittee from this conference and the people herein form that task group and initiate the cooperative dialogue and set forth a process to approach the WPBR problem in a holistic manner.

Literature cited

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