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Off The Blacklist

Banned For Decades, Black Currants Are Back, And Maple Lane Farms Is Taking The Lead

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A once blacklisted plant has put Preston on the national agricultural map.

Allyn Brown III, owner of Maple Lane Farm & Market, is the largest grower of black currants in the country and began selling his black currant juice drink at markets and super stores this week.

With more than five times the Vitamin C of oranges and double the antioxidants of blueberries, black currant jams and juices are already hugely popular in Europe.

But in this country, the species to which the black currant belongs â€” the Ribes family â€” was banned for commercial production by the U.S. Department of Agriculture from 1909 until 1966. The black currant was thought to help in the spread of white pine blister rust, a disease that is sometimes fatal to white pine trees. It was not until 1983 that the ban on commercial production of Ribes, which includes red currant, black currant and gooseberries â€” was lifted in Connecticut.

Several years ago, Brown, who has run Maple Lane since 1978, began searching for a new crop. Networking with other growers in New England, he learned about currants and gooseberries and decided to try raising them. Initially, he grew a few plants so customers could pick their own. Then he realized black currants might be a cash crop for him.

This July, he plans to harvest 30 acres of black currants, using a \$125,000 harvester he purchased and had shipped from Finland. It will happen in a two-week period since the fruit all ripens at the same time.

By the end of the growing season, he'll have another 10 acres planted. If he can lease more land, Brown says he'll add additional plants.

â€œPeople ask me, â€”What's it like?â€” and I tell them, it's kind of like a grape, maybe between a grape and a cranberry,â€” he says.

Some describe the flavor as a cross between a grape and a raspberry, slightly tart, but pleasant in a single swallow.

Brown's berries harvested last summer were frozen in 1,000-pound bins and pressed into juice at a New York processing plant last week. That juice is now being shipped to stores, including McQuade's Marketplace, Shaw's supermarkets, and the Maple Lane farm stand. It will sell for about \$3.89 a half-gallon, and eventually will be available in quart and 16-ounce sizes. It should be served cold, and has a shelf life of about eight weeks.

Brown grows a variety called Tatania that he buys from Vancouver. It is completely resistant to white pine blister rust. He plants the bushes in hedgerows that grow to about 5 feet tall and produce berries about the size of a medium blueberry. The bushes' leaves look like those on a maple tree.

Off the bush, the fruit is extremely acidic and tart. Brown says it's rarely, if ever, eaten fresh.

To make his drink, he adds filtered water and fructose. The first batch last year was made from concentrate, but now, it's a fresh press product.

Even with 18 percent juice in his drink, the flavor is potent.

“I hired a flavors company to work with me on the formula,” says Brown, explaining that there were many taste tests. “I want it strong enough for adults, but I want kids to like it, too.

“My daughter drinks it, and she's 6. And it's so much better for you than apple juice.”

Trade publications tout the nutritional, health and wellness benefits of black currant consumption, and note that while twice as many black currants are grown in the world than raspberries, most Americans have no idea what they are, can't buy them and have probably never tasted them.

Most of the world's black currants are grown in Europe, and most are processed into juice, jams, preserves, pie-fillings, liquor or tea.

According to Northland Berry News, “Black currants contain specific aroma and flavor compounds in such a concentrated form that we do not find its counterpart in any other fruit in nature. Our sense of taste is simply not used to such a concentration of compounds.”

The trade publication says the beneficial effects of the black currant have been recorded in connection with apoplectic stroke, radiation, cold, heart disorders, anemia, exhaustion, night blindness, and numerous other maladies.

Brown started planting black currants because he saw a future in the crop.

It's ironic, he thinks, that the federal government banned commercial cultivation of the Ribes species, which is native to America, to protect the white pine, which was imported from Europe. While commercial crops were eradicated, the currants and gooseberries thrived in the wild.

At the turn of the last century, when the ban was imposed, New York state was the country's largest producer. Now, farmers there are talking about getting back into the business that is still banned in Massachusetts. Other growers in New England are considering the crop for chutneys, purees, jams, yogurts, and desserts.

The Northeast, Brown says, is a great place to grow black currants since they need some cold weather to thrive.

“They're shallow-rooted, and pretty forgiving,” he says. “They like moisture. Really, they're a nice crop to grow.”

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