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## **Black Currants: Growth Product?**

by Liz Michalski

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Allyn Brown swears he can't remember the last time he dropped a quarter in a slot machine, but that doesn't mean he's not a gambler.

"Farmers are the biggest gamblers around," says Brown, owner of Maple Lane Farms in Preston.

Now, Brown is betting you'll like the taste of his newest harvest, black currants. He's pressing the berries and turning them into Maple Lane Farms Black Currant Juice drink. The dark purple beverage resembles grape juice in color and tastes somewhere between grapes and raspberries. Too tart to drink straight up, the berries are mixed with water and fructose. The final product contains 18 percent currant juice.

"It's sweet enough to that kids like it but not so sweet that it turns off the adults," Brown says.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture banned commercial production of the fruits from 1909 until 1966. That's because black currants - which resemble small blueberries - are an alternative host for white pine blister rust. The disease lives first in white pines and other five-needle pine species, then moves to currants and related plants, then back to the trees. Although not dangerous to currants, the disease can kill some trees.

Connecticut kept the ban until 1983, according to Paul Waggoner, former director of the New Haven Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station. The ban still exists in several states, including Maine and New York.

In Europe, however, black currant is big business. Made into juices, jellies and jams, it's also used in health supplements, with one cup of the fruit containing more than double the daily requirement of vitamin C. It's also the main ingredient in the liquor cassis, Brown says.

"But in the United States, there are two or three generations that don't know what currants are," the farmer says. He's hoping to change that by becoming the largest grower of black currants in the United States. Three years ago Brown, whose farm also offers pick-your-own Christmas trees, apples, peaches and berries, was casting about for an alternative crop when he heard some industry buzz about black currants. "I'm always willing to try something new," he says.

He planted 32 acres of a rust-resistant strain of black currants, which prevents the disease from spreading. Last July, he brought in his first crop with the help of a \$100,000 harvester imported from Finland. For Brown, who plans to plant an additional 20 or so acres in currants this spring, the picking wasn't pain-free. The harvester was shipped late and then impounded by customs for several days. Because currants ripen all at once, the delay meant some wasted fruit. But Brown still wound up with about 35,000 pounds of berries.

Originally, his plan was to grow the currants for major U.S. juice manufacturers. "They all agree that the juice has good flavor, that they want new flavor, but nobody took the ball and ran with it," he said. So Brown found a freezing and processing facility in New York and worked with a beverage consultant company to develop the best-tasting recipe. The drink will be sold cold, similar to apple cider and orange juice, in a

half-gallon container. It has a shelf life of about 12 weeks, and will retail for about \$3.75.

Test samples have been difficult for Brown to keep on hand. "All my employees keep drinking it," he says. He hopes that the fruits taste and healthful qualities will appeal to children and adults alike.

Besides vitamin C, the fruit also contains other antioxidants, including vitamin A, vitamin E, and vitamin B6, which can help protect against some cancers, says Meredith Belden, a registered dietitian at the University of Connecticut Health Center.

"Including black currants in your diet is a great way to increase the antioxidants, vitamins, and minerals needed for good health, but keep in mind that you can reap the same benefits from all fresh fruits and vegetables," said Belden, who points out that specialty drinks or supplements aren't necessary for a healthy diet.

But as a delicacy, Brown sees a lot of potential in the juice. It's great as a mixer, either with other juices or in cocktails, he said. His brother owns a cider mill in Vermont, and next season they hope to introduce a summer cider featuring black currants. Brown also hopes to team up with other companies for additional currant products, including currant-flavored soda, wines, jams, and jellies. But for the time being, the berries are Brown's last gamble.

"I've promised my wife that's it," he says.

The juice is available through Maple Lane Farms starting April 1, and Brown hopes to have it available in Connecticut grocery stores. For more information, contact Maple Lane Farms at 860-889-3766 or at [www.maplelane.com](http://www.maplelane.com)