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Making Currants Current Again

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Currants *are* uncommon in this country. Most likely, your experience begins and ends with the dried ones that look like tiny black raisins. Well, guess what? Those are raisins, produced from the tiny grapes of the Zante variety.

The confusion dates back to the popularization of currants in Renaissance Europe, when they were thought to resemble very small, dried, seedless grapes shipped from Corinth, Greece, the word "Corinth" having gradually morphed into "currant." Those tiny grapes are now sold afresh, too, as Champagne grapes -- not, however, because they are made into Champagne, but because they are so small they look like little bubbles.

Then and now, currants are prized for their flavor, sweetness, vitamins and antioxidants. No thorns hinder picking, and no hard seeds preclude nibbling them straight from the bush. They come in three colors: red, white and black, all of which are separate species. White currants are considered the sweetest. The red, also delicious, are the most beautiful and make a stunning red jelly. The black ones are the most valuable nutritionally and though tart are fine for cooking, as well as for the famous French liqueur creme de cassis.

If you are wondering what has kept these treats from the garden and the produce bin, it was their banishment 100 years ago for harboring white pine blister rust, a disease fatal to a valuable native conifer. That rationale has all but disappeared, however, as other hosts have been implicated and rust-resistant currant varieties developed. It is still illegal in many states to plant the less resistant black ones.

Red currants, on the other hand, are usually allowed and are plants that no edible landscape should be without. The fruits, dangling on stems called strigs, look like jewels when backlit by the sun. The five-foot-tall bushes are easy to site and maintain in the average yard.

Though considered a northern plant that suffers in hot weather, currants will grow in the Washington area if given partial shade. Yes, that's right: a fruit that ripens effectively in leafy yards. You can even plant it on the north side of a building if there is sun early or late in the day.

It tolerates clay soil -- prefers it, even, for its moisture-holding capacity. Bringing it through a Washington summer is not a problem if you keep the ground irrigated. A simple soaker hose does the trick, along with moisture-retentive soil enriched with organic matter. Stems two or three years old bear the best fruits, so older ones should be pruned out in late winter or early spring.

Currants are among the first fruits to ripen in summer. It is not too late to order some from Edible Landscaping (http://www.ediblelandscaping.com [1]) in Afton, Va. The Virginia Cooperative Extension offers a good article [2] on the cultivation of this fine old fruit, just waiting to be rediscovered (search "currant cultivars" at http://pubs.ext.vt.edu [3]).

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