

Currants

by Julie Cascio

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Currants (*Ribes* spp.) are translucent berries clustered on a small branch just below the lobed, toothed leaves. Several currants grow in Alaska, with either red or black fruit. Habitat ranges from moist woods to open areas, along stream banks and in meadows. Berries ripen in mid- to late summer. They can be eaten raw or dried or made into jams and jellies, syrups, pies and cobblers.

American red currants (*Ribes triste* Pallas) are smooth, red, translucent berries found on the straggly brown branches of shrubs. Flowers are in clusters 1 to 2 inches long on old wood just below the leafy tufts. Red currants are found widely in Alaska in cool woods, swamps and subalpine ravines. They are found from the head of the Lynn Canal in Southeastern Alaska east and north to Valdez, Seward, Matanuska, Copper River, Anvik, Kuskokwim River country, the Seward Peninsula and the Kobuk River area.

Trailing black currants (*Ribes laxiflorum* Pursh) are hairy black berries with a bluish tinge, and are found in Southeastern Alaska north to Skagway and



Ribes lacustre. Photo by Walter Siegmund

Yakutat, on the Kenai Peninsula and in central Alaska. Bristly black currants (*Ribes lacustre*), or swamp gooseberries, are bristly purplish-black berries with a very sour flavor. Northern black currants (*Ribes hudsonianum*) are smooth berries that are very sour and somewhat bitter. In addition, there are several other barely edible currants that grow in Alaska.

Nutrition and Health

Currants are a rich source of antioxidants, a group of biochemicals shown to be an important part of the human diet. The oxygen radical absorption capacity test (ORAC) shows overall antioxidant activity. Scores above 40 are considered very high. Alaska grown red currants had the following ORAC values when tested:

Frozen Berries	43	Jelly	28
Fruit Leather	158	Juice	20



Photo by Leo Michel

Black currants are rich in vitamin C and fiber, and are a good source of manganese and potassium.

Storage and Preservation

How to Clean and Store

Spread a clean, dry terry cloth towel over a slanted surface, such as a cutting board with one end propped up a few inches above the other. Gently roll the currants down the towel; most of the debris and leaves will cling to the towel, while the berries roll off. Currants may be stored covered in the refrigerator for five to seven days.

How to Freeze

To freeze currants, arrange dry, fresh berries in one layer on a cookie sheet and place the sheet in the freezer. When frozen, transfer berries to freezer bags or containers. Properly frozen currants will last up to two years.

How to Dry

Select firm, dry currants. Cover a flat tray with cheesecloth or light muslin. Spread the berries on the cloth; place the tray in the sun. Dry in sun for two days, turning once or twice. Then set tray in a warm, dry place and let currants stand until leathery to the touch. To dry berries in a dehydrator, spread on open screen and follow the instructions for drying berries that come with the dehydrator. Oven drying is possible, but very low heat (140°F) must be used and the oven door must be left ajar so moisture can escape. Store dried berries in a cool, dry place. Dried currants will be very hard and seedy. They can be soaked in water for use in baking.

- **To sterilize canning jars**, boil in water for 10 minutes.
- **To prepare two-piece lids** (rings and tops), wash, rinse and keep in hot water until ready to use.
- **If less sugar is desired** in recipes calling for pectin, use no-sugar-needed pectin and follow the instructions for using that pectin.
- **To use a boiling water canner**, see instructions on page 3.

How to Extract Juice

Combine 14 cups currants and 1 cup water. Crush currants and bring to simmer. Simmer over low heat for 10 minutes. Place in a jelly bag or in layers of cheesecloth in a colander. Let the juice drip into a bowl. For clear juice, do not twist or press jelly bag or cheesecloth. For long-term storage, the juice should be frozen or canned. *Yield: 5 cups*

Hot pack for juice

Sterilize canning jars. Heat juice, stirring occasionally, until it begins to boil. Pour into hot jars, leaving ¼ inch headspace. Wipe jar rims. Adjust lids. Process in a boiling water canner.

<i>Pints or quarts</i>	5 minutes
<i>Half gallons</i>	10 minutes

How to Prepare Puree

Cooked method: Add 1 cup of water to 4 cups of currants. Cook until skins have popped. Press through a food mill or sieve. Discard skins and seeds. *Yield: 2 cups*

Uncooked method: Rinse 4 cups of currants, drain, put in a blender and blend until the consistency of thick puree. *Yield: 2 cups*

For long-term storage, the puree should be frozen: Pack into rigid container leaving ½ inch headspace for expansion in freezing. Seal and freeze. Canning is not a safe method of preserving puree. Currant puree may be dried to make fruit leather.

Recipes

Red Currant Syrup

1 cup currant juice
2 cups sugar

Combine juice and sugar in saucepan and heat to 160°F. Use a candy thermometer; do not boil. The syrup is ready to use over waffles, pancakes, hot biscuits, ice cream and other desserts. The syrup will keep up to six months in the refrigerator without crystallizing.

For long-term storage: sterilize pint or half-pint canning jars and prepare lids; immediately pour hot syrup into hot canning jars, leaving ¼ inch head-space. Wipe jar rims and add prepared two-piece lids. Process in a boiling water canner for 5 minutes.

Yield: 2 cups

Currant Fruit Leather

2 cups currant puree
¼ cup honey

Combine puree and honey. Line a cookie sheet with plastic wrap or parchment paper. Spread puree mixture evenly about ⅛ to ¼ inch thick over the plastic, but do not push it completely to the sides of the cookie sheet. Oven dry at 140°F for approximately 6 hours, leaving the oven door slightly open so moisture can escape. If drying in a dehydrator, follow manufacturer's directions for fruit leather.

Yield: 1 sheet

Currant Jelly

6½ cups currant juice
1 package powdered pectin (1 ¾ ounces)
7 cups sugar

Sterilize pint or half-pint canning jars and prepare lids. Measure sugar and set aside. Measure prepared juice into a large saucepan and add powdered pectin. Place on high heat; stir constantly and bring to a full rolling boil that cannot be stirred down. At once stir in sugar. Again, bring to a full rolling boil. Boil hard for 1 minute, stirring constantly. Remove from heat and quickly skim off foam. Immediately pour jelly into hot canning jars, leaving ¼ inch head-space. Wipe jar rims and add prepared two-piece lids. Process in a boiling water canner for 5 minutes.

Yield: 9 cups

To process in a boiling water canner, follow these steps:

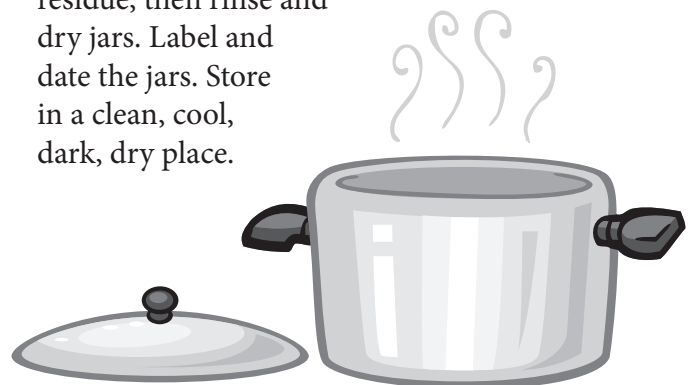
Fill the canner halfway with water. Preheat water to a low boil. Place filled jars, fitted with lids, into the canner on the rack. Add more boiling water, if needed, so the water level is at least 1 inch above jar tops. Turn heat to its highest position until water boils vigorously. When the water boils, set a timer for the recommended processing time indicated in the recipe. Cover with the canner lid and lower heat setting to maintain a gentle boil throughout the processing time. Add more boiling water, if needed, to keep the water level above the jars.

When the jars have been boiled for the recommended time, turn off the heat and remove the canner lid. Using a jar lifter, remove the jars and place them on a towel, leaving at least 1 inch of space between the jars during cooling.

After cooling jars for 12 to 24 hours, remove the screw bands and test seals. Press the middle of

the lid with a finger. If the lid springs up when finger is released, the lid is unsealed. If a lid fails to seal on a jar, remove the lid and check the jar-sealing surface for tiny nicks. If necessary, change the jar, add a new, properly prepared lid and reprocess within 24 hours using the same processing time. Alternately, adjust headspace to 1½ inches and freeze or store in the refrigerator and use within three days.

If lids are tightly sealed on cooled jars, remove screw bands, wash the lid and jar to remove food residue, then rinse and dry jars. Label and date the jars. Store in a clean, cool, dark, dry place.



Red Currant Jelly

5 cups currant juice
7 cups sugar
3 ounces liquid pectin

Sterilize pint or half-pint canning jars and prepare lids. Open liquid pectin pouch and stand upright in a cup or glass. Pour currant juice into a saucepan. Stir sugar into juice. Place over high heat and bring to a full rolling boil that cannot be stirred down. Quickly stir in liquid pectin. Again bring to a full rolling boil and boil 1 minute. Remove from heat and quickly skim off foam. Immediately pour jelly into hot canning jars, leaving ¼ inch headspace. Wipe jar rims and add prepared two-piece lids. Process in a boiling water canner for 5 minutes.

Yield: 8 cups

UAF Cooperative Extension Resources

Jams and Jellies – Lesson 5, Food Preservation Series,
FNH-00562E

Canning Overview – Lesson 2, Food Preservation Series, FHN-00562B

Collecting and Using Alaska's Wild Berries and Other Wild Products (\$10), FNH-00120

Fruit Leather, FNH-00228

Canning Basics DVD (\$5), FNH-01280

Jams and Jellies DVD (\$5), FNH-01290

Other Resources

Complete Guide to Home Canning, 2009 revision. USDA Agriculture Information Bulletin No. 539. Washington, D.C.: USDA Publications. http://nchfp.uga.edu/publications/publications_usda.html.

www.uaf.edu/ces or 1-877-520-5211

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