

Minor Small Fruit Crops for New Mexico Gardens

Revised by Ron Walser, Urban Small Farm Specialist



The majority of small fruit crops—such as grape, raspberry, blackberry, and strawberry—are classified as “berry”-bearing plants. For the purposes of this publication, the term “small fruit crop” has been expanded to include some of the bush cherries.

Many areas of the United States offer a great variety of small fruit crops for backyard production. Some, like blueberries, are not adapted to the alkaline soils that characterize most New Mexico gardens. For an uncommon small fruit, New Mexico gardeners can try tayberries, currants, gooseberries, elderberries, bush cherries, and sea buckthorn (sea berry). Improve your chance of success by planting in heavily composted soils in areas with good water quality (low salt levels).

Tayberry

Released in 1979 by the Scottish Crop Research Institute, the tayberry is a cross between a loganberry (‘Aughinbaugh’ blackberry x red raspberry) and a black raspberry. The tayberry has a growth habit and fruit similar to the loganberry, which in turn are similar to the blackberry.

Fruit of the tayberry are borne on short, strong laterals on prickly canes 6 to 7 feet long. The tayberry fruit, like that of the raspberry and blackberry, is an aggregate fruit consisting of a collection of drupelets. Plants are very vigorous and require a sturdy trellis for support. Commercial yields can be heavy—up to 12 tons per acre. The juicy fruit are cone-shaped, deep purple, and up to 1½ inches long. Like a blackberry, the core remains in the berry when picked. Tayberries are somewhat less acid than loganberries, with a strong, slightly tart flavor, and can be eaten fresh or processed as jams or jellies.

Training and other cultural requirements are similar to those for trailing blackberries (refer to NMSU Extension Guide H-325, *Blackberry Production in New Mexico*). Plants will need protection below -15°F. Tayberries make an excellent crop to grow under windows as a home security barrier because the canes are so prickly.

Currants and Gooseberries

Currants (red and black) (*Ribes* spp.) and gooseberries (*Ribes* spp.) grow best in higher elevations of New Mexico under cool, moist growing conditions. Both can be grown in warmer areas of the state in partial shade or with a northern exposure. Avoid exposures subject to dry, desiccating winds. Currants and gooseberries are quite hardy (down to -40°F), but bloom early in the season, requiring good air drainage to protect them from late frosts.

Gooseberries reach a mature height of 4 to 5 feet with compact, arching, thorny canes. Currants grow 4 to 6 feet tall and have thornless canes. Both are deciduous shrubs.

Plants prefer well-drained, loamy to clay soils with a pH of 6.5 to 7.0. Complete a soil test before planting to determine initial fertility levels, pH, and salt content. Add ample quantities of compost and/or peat moss to help improve the soil structure and water-holding capacity.

Plant 1- or 2-year-old plants early in the spring 4 to 5 feet apart in the row. Remove any damaged roots from bare-root plants before planting. Set each plant 1 to 2 inches deeper in the garden than it was grown in the nursery. Cut the canes back to within 5 inches of the soil surface. Water immediately.

Maintaining the plants requires good fertilizer and pruning programs. Mulch the plants with compost, which will improve the soil and help keep it from drying out. Under good soil conditions, plants should thrive with an annual spring application of a low analysis fertilizer (such as 10-10-10) at a rate of ¼ to ⅓ cup per plant. Composted manure can also be used.

Currants produce most of their cluster-type fruit on spurs 2 to 3 years old; older canes should be removed. Gooseberries tend to bear somewhat heavier and earlier than currants on 1-year-old and older canes. Fruit are borne singly along the canes. To prune both currants and gooseberries, remove any canes older than

3 years and thin the younger canes. Each bush should ideally have a combination of canes 1, 2, and 3 years old. Leave no more than 6 to 10 canes per bush. Both currants and gooseberries eventually form a hedge.

Pick currants when they are soft and have a deep red or black color. Pick gooseberries when they reach full size and the berries turn slightly pink or red. Both can be eaten fresh or used in juice, jam, jelly, and pie. Currants tend to have a milder flavor than gooseberries.

'Red Lake' and 'Perfection' are two of the most popular red currants while 'Crandall' and 'Ben Lomond' are popular black currants. 'Crandall' appears to be the best producer in NMSU Los Lunas Science Center trials. 'Pixwell', 'Poorman', and 'Welcome' are popular gooseberries with half-inch berries. Both currants and gooseberries are generally self-fruitful, so only one variety is necessary for pollination.

Elderberries

The most common elderberry in the United States is the American elderberry, or sweet elder (*Sambucus canadensis*). Reaching a mature height of 8 to 12 feet, it is a vigorous grower. Thick clusters of numerous creamy white flowers are borne on five-stemmed, flat to umbrella-shaped flower clusters. The elderberry produces round, 1/4-inch purple-black berries. The juicy fruit are a rich source of iron and vitamin C. Berries are used for making jelly, jam, pie, juice, and wine. Seeds are quite large and can become a nuisance if they get stuck in your teeth.

Elderberries will thrive in most soils, but prefer loams. Light, sandy soils should be well conditioned with ample quantities of compost and/or peat moss to hold water. Do not allow elderberries to be stressed for moisture, and protect them from dry winds, especially during fruit development. Mulch the roots to help control weeds and keep the soil moist. No fertilizer is required the first year, assuming they are planted in a fertile soil. In the spring of each following year, apply a balanced fertilizer at moderate rates.

Elderberries are partially self-fruitful, but their yields will increase significantly with cross-pollination from another variety. Fruit are produced on 1- to 3-year-old wood. To prune, remove wood older than 3 years and thin weak wood to encourage strong growth of new wood.

Harvest the berries by removing the whole cluster with pruning shears. Then strip the berries into a

clean bucket for processing. Strain the seeds from the juice and sweeten the juice with sugar.

Popular varieties include 'Adams', 'Johns', 'Nova', 'Kent', and 'York'. 'Nova' and 'York' are doing very well at the NMSU Los Lunas Science Center.

Bush Cherries

The Nanking cherry (*Prunus tomentosa*) is one of the most popular bush cherries, growing to a mature height of 10 feet. This deciduous shrub bears white to pinkish flowers early in the spring. The half-inch diameter, tart, red fruit are similar to sour pie cherries and make excellent pies, jellies, and jams.

The Nanking cherry makes an excellent windbreak for home gardens. Its relatively short height makes it easy to protect from light frosts in the spring with a tarp or blanket.

Hansen's bush cherry (sand cherry) (*Prunus besseyi*) is somewhat more drought tolerant than the Nanking cherry. Small, white flowers that blossom in the spring produce purplish black fruit on a 4- to 6-foot shrub. The tart, tangy fruit are used in pies, preserves, and sauces. The silvery green leaves turn crimson in the fall, making it an excellent multipurpose shrub for landscaping and fruiting.

Sea Buckthorn (Sea Berry)

The sea buckthorn (sea berry) (*Hippophae rhamnoides*) is highly prized in Europe and Asia, but virtually unknown here. A fine ornamental shrub with narrow grayish-green foliage, it is particularly striking when covered with bright orange fruit. The berries are tart, but tasty and nutritious; are an excellent source of vitamins C, A, and E; and make a delicious juice and reportedly medicinally valuable oil. Available female varieties include 'Golden Sweet', 'Leikora', 'Titan', 'Amber Dawn', 'Botanica', 'Radiant', and 'Star of Altai'. Female varieties that are doing very well in the NMSU Los Lunas Science Center trials include 'Amber Dawn' (compact, 4–6 feet tall), 'Star of Altai' (medium, 6–8 feet tall), and 'Botanica' (large, 8–10 feet tall). One male plant is recommended for every 6–8 female plants for proper pollination. The male plants are also attractive ornamental shrubs and are covered with attractive large golden-brown flower buds in winter and spring.

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