

Workshop Title:

Growing Organic Currants

Speaker(s) & their titles:

Raymond Loo, Springwillow Farms

Executive Summary :

Raymond is a certified organic farmer from PEI. He recently began to grow black currants as a crop on his farm, and has been met with success. He emphasizes that before a farmer grows any commercial crop, they must first find a market; carefully choose the variety; and figure out how they are going to harvest, store and process the crop. Never grow a crop without planning ahead first, and never plant more than you can afford to lose!

< <http://www.acornorganic.org/pdf/blackcurrantmanual.pdf>>

Notes :

Market:

- Raymond is selling his berries to Japan. He believes that farmers must take more initiative in their marketing and think outside of North America, where potentially more diverse markets exist.

Varieties of black currants:

- 'Ben Connan' variety produces larger berries, but the bush is shorter.
- 'Titania' variety produces berries that are a bit smaller, but the bushes are much taller.

Planting:

- Really get rid of the weeds before you plant. Planting through black plastic can be useful, especially during the first few years while the plants are still establishing themselves. A soil pH of 6.0 or slightly higher is ideal.

To Feed:

- Dig around the canes and put down canola/crab meal. Canola meal releases its nutrients slowly, crab meal quickly. You can also use seaweed/eelgrass.
- Manure and compost can be full of weeds, best to avoid if possible.
- Don't fertilize too late in the season, because the bushes will keep growing and will not harden off enough to survive the winter.

Pruning:

- Prune about $\frac{3}{4}$ of the stems off. You want to encourage new growth in the center, and to get rid of old and crooked stems. Crooked stems can cause problems with a

mechanical harvester, so it's best to just prune them off and they will grow back straight.

- Prune in the early spring (March). Dormant pruning is best.
- Prune properly to encourage tall growth.
- Be careful of planting in windy areas as the canes may easily be bent, particularly the tallest bushes.

Weed Management:

- ESSENTIAL for currants. Mowing just doesn't cut it, you have to do more to get rid of the weeds. You can use black plastic, fabric, eel grass, any other kind of mulch, or till right around the base of the plant.
- If you use plastic mulch the plants have a tendency to develop roots directly beneath the plastic, which can be bad if you ever pull the plastic off. But plastic mulch is very economical and saves lots of labour in the long run.
- Some trials show that tilling can be as good as using the plastic.

Spacing:

- With the 'Titania' variety, Raymond originally planted the bushes at 3-foot spacing with the intention of mechanically harvesting the berries. The bushes must be close enough together that they hold each other up for the harvester.
- The following time he decreased his spacing to 30 inches, and his next crop is going to be planted even closer. If the plants aren't holding each other straight-up, the harvester may miss a lot of berries, particularly the lower ones. When the bushes are laden with berries and the branches get heavy, they bend down even more, so it is even more important to have them close enough together.
- If you are just planting in your backyard and want to pick by hand, you can plant your bushes much further away. This also provides more air circulation and less chance of disease.

Berries:

- In the first year stems just grow; in the second year the stems produce berries
- It takes around 3 years to get a decent yield. Mechanically harvesting can miss up to half of your yield.
- When growing organically, you want to achieve about 3-4 lbs of berries per bush. Any less for a commercial market isn't practical.
- Aim for the very dark berries that are slightly soft before harvesting. It's easy to pick black currants too early, when they will be sour. Mature and over-ripe berries have a similar black colour, under-mature berries will be a bit lighter. As a rule of thumb, when you think your berries are dark and ripe, wait two more weeks before picking and then they will actually be ripe.
- The first canes Raymond planted were cuttings grown for one year. Next, he used two year old canes, which had much better roots and were more successful.
- Raymond's supplier is McGinnis of BC.

Mechanical Harvester:

- Straddles the plant and shakes the berries off. Expensive. Good idea to plant your fields close together as the mechanical harvester is slow and awkward to transport.

**2011 NS ACORN Conference
Holiday Inn Halifax Harbourview**

- It won't do well with shorter bushes, as it can't pick the low berries. 6-7" above ground is the lowest it can harvest berries.

Preservation:

- Raymond infuses his berries in a sugar-water mixture, and then freezes them. When they are frozen their round shape is preserved. Then the frozen berries are put through a tumbler to scratch off their skin (if the skin is not removed then the berries have a sour taste). The berries are then stored in a freezer at very cold temperatures. If the berries are stored too warm (over -8°C) they will stick together.