

# Minor Small Fruit Crops for New Mexico Gardens

## Guide H-326

George W. Dickerson, Extension Horticulture Specialist

Cooperative Extension Service  
College of Agriculture and  
Home Economics



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The majority of small fruit crops—such as the grape, raspberry, blackberry, and strawberry—are classified as “berry”-bearing plants. For purposes of this publication, the term “small fruit crop” has been expanded to include some of the bush cherries.<sup>1</sup>

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, and bush cherries. Improve your chance of success by planting in heavily composted soils in areas with better quality water (low salt levels).

### Tayberry

Released in 1979 by the Scottish Horticultural 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 a 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. 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 1-1/2 inches long. Like a blackberry, the core remains in the berry when picked. Fruit are somewhat less acid than the loganberry with a strong, slightly tart flavor. Fruit can be eaten fresh or processed as jams or jellies.

<sup>1</sup>For more information on small fruit crops, see these NMSU Extension publications: *Growing Grapes in New Mexico* (Circular 483); *Commercial Everbearing Red Raspberry Production for New Mexico* (Guide H-318); *Raspberries for the Home Garden* (Guide H-320); *Blackberry Production for New Mexico* (Guide H-325); and *Home Garden Strawberry Production in New Mexico* (Guide H-324). Download them from the World Wide Web at [www.cahe.nmsu.edu/pubs/\\_h/](http://www.cahe.nmsu.edu/pubs/_h/), or contact the bulletin office at NMSU’s Department of Agricultural Communications at (505) 646-3228.

Training and other cultural requirements are similar to those for trailing blackberries (refer to NMSU Cooperative Extension Service 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

Red currants (*Ribes sativum*) and gooseberries (*Ribes grossularia*) 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 canes. Canes are thorny. 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 improves the soil and keeps 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 1/4 to 1/3 cup per plant.

Red currants produce most of their cluster-type fruit on spurs 2 to 3 years old. Remove older canes.

Gooseberries tend to bear somewhat heavier and earlier than red 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 red currants when they are soft and have a deep red 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 with medium-sized fruit borne in loose clusters. 'Pixwell' and 'Welcome' are popular gooseberries with half-inch berries. Both red 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's a vigorous grower. Thick clusters of numerous creamy white flowers are borne on five-stemmed, umbellate cymes (flat inflorescence). The elderberry produces globose, 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. Don't 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-fruited, 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'.

### 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 (*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 red in the fall, making it an excellent multipurpose shrub for landscaping and fruiting.