

## GOLDEN CURRANT

*Ribes aureum* Pursh var.

*aureum*

Plant Symbol = RIAUA

Contributed by: USDA NRCS National Plant Data Center & the Biota of North America Program



Botany Dept., NMNH, Smithsonian Institution  
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### Alternate Names

Buffalo currant, fragrant golden currant, golden flowering currant, clove currant, spicebush

### Uses

**Wildlife:** Fruits of *Ribes* species, including the golden currant, are a valuable food source for songbirds, chipmunks, ground squirrels, as well as numerous wildlife species and other animals.

**Ethnobotanic:** The sweet and flavorful fruits are full of seeds but are popular for making jam, jelly, pie, and even ice cream. Some western Indian tribes used currants (*Ribes* species) for making pemmican. The

Kiowa Indians believed that snakes were afraid of the currant bush and used it as a snakebite remedy. Other tribes have used the fruits to color clay pots.

**Conservation:** The fragrant (clove odor), golden-yellow flowers of spring, yellowish to red fall foliage, edible fruits, and wide ecological range make golden currant a valued ornamental shrub for a variety of natural landscapes. Golden currant is easily cultivated from seed or cuttings.

### Status

Please consult the PLANTS Web site and your State Department of Natural Resources for this plant's current status, such as, state noxious status and wetland indicator values.

### Description

**General:** Currant family (Grossulariaceae). A native shrub 1-3 m tall, spineless, with numerous, erect-arching branches forming an irregular crown up to 6 meters tall or more; bark gray to red-brown; rhizomatous. Leaves deciduous, light green and glossy, alternate or clustered, orbicular or cuneate-ovate with 3-5 rounded lobes, (0.6-)1-2.5(4.7) cm long and wide, cuneate to subcordate at base, glabrous or sometimes lightly hairy beneath. Flowers in short racemes of 5-10(-15), with the fragrance of cloves; long-tubed (from fused sepals) and trumpet-shaped, with 5 yellow sepal lobes spreading at the top, with 5, short, reddish petals inserted at the top of the tube. Fruit a berry 6-10 mm diameter, globose to ellipsoid, ripening from green to yellow to red and finally black to dark purple, with numerous seeds. The common name pertains to the conspicuous, golden flowers; "currant" is the general name for *Ribes* fruit.

**Variation within the species:** *Ribes odoratum*, often considered a distinct species, recognized by its considerably larger flowers, has been placed (replaced, as var. *villosum*) as the eastern segment of the broader species.

Var. *aureum* – (golden currant)

Var. *gracillimum* (Coville & Britt.) Jepson – (golden currant)

Var. *villosum* DC. – (fragrant golden currant, buffalo currant, clove currant)

synonym: *Ribes odoratum* H. Wendl.

*Distribution:* Var. *aureum* is widespread in the western US and southeastern Canada, with populations in Ontario and perhaps Quebec, as far south in the US as trans-Pecos Texas. Var. *gracillimum* is endemic to California. Var. *villosum* in the central US, from western Texas to Montana and eastward to New York and Vermont; it is absent from the Atlantic seaboard. The species is naturalized in Europe from garden escapes. For current distribution, please consult the Plant Profile page for this species on the PLANTS Web site.

### **Adaptation**

Golden currant grows in grasslands, coniferous forests and woodlands, and riparian and mountain shrub communities. It occurs on floodplains, along streams, in ravines and washes, by springs, and on mountain slopes, at elevations of about 800–2600 meters. It is generally an early to mid-seral species in western coniferous forests. Var. *villosum* occurs on cliffs, rocky slopes, ravines, bluffs, open hillside, and thicket margins, often in sandy habitats. Golden currant is somewhat shade tolerant and may grow in open, scattered, and dense pine stands, but it is usually suppressed by a denser canopy.

Flowering (March–)April–June, just after appearance of the leaves; fruiting (May–)June–August.

### **Establishment**

Plants of *Ribes* generally begin fruiting after 3 years. Seeds may remain viable in the soil and duff for many years. Germination is enhanced by scarification, but relatively good germination of golden currant seeds was obtained by stratification at -2.2–2.2 degrees C for 60 days without scarification.

Golden currant transplants well and forms suckers. Plants can also be grown from cuttings. It reproduces vegetatively by rhizomes, sprouting after cutting and fire.

### **Management**

Golden currant can be used to re-vegetate roadsides and disturbed areas, such as mine spoils and rangeland. It is rated mostly good in initial establishment, growth rate, persistence, germination, seed production, ease of planting, and natural spread. It tolerates shearing and may be used on dry, exposed sites in a range of soil types, and it is a good soil stabilizer.

Golden currant is an alternate host for white pine blister rust (*Cronartium ribicola*); this and other species of *Ribes* have been targets of various eradication efforts where white pine is of commercial

interest. Please check the PLANTS Profile for this plant for links to additional information.

Fire top-kills golden currant, but it can survive low-to moderate-severity fire by sprouting from rhizomes. Such fires also scarify soil-stored seed and enhance germination. Severe fire probably kills golden currant and may destroy soil-stored seeds.

### **Cultivars, Improved and Selected Materials (and area of origin)**

These plant materials are readily available from commercial sources. One cultivar ('Crandall') has been referred to as "the North Country's answer to *Forsythia*." Other horticultural selections have been made for hardiness, flower color and density, and fruit taste and size.

Contact your local Natural Resources Conservation Service (formerly Soil Conservation Service) office for more information. Look in the phone book under "United States Government." The Natural Resources Conservation Service will be listed under the subheading "Department of Agriculture."

### **References**

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- Wasser, C.H. 1982. *Ecology and culture of selected species useful in revegetating disturbed lands in the West*. FWS/OBS-82/56. USDI, Fish and Wildlife Service, Washington, DC.
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