

Weed and fertility management of establishing black currants with Karen Nelson

Latin name for this plant is Ribes Nigrum. It is a wood perennial plant. It can be planted as a hedgerow. It can grow 3 to 7 feet in height. Best if planted 2.5 feet apart in rows, with rows being 11 to 13 feet apart. It takes 4 years for them to reach production.

Black currant has a very sweet, sharp taste. It is used in fresh market and as well as in value-added production. Can be used to make liqueurs, ice cream, juices, etc.

They have not been produced locally in a long time because of the appearance of White pine blister rust in the 1900s. This doesn't kill it, but the industry back then lobbied for its destruction because of the effect on the white pine needle.

It contains more potassium, vitamin C and antioxidants than most fruit, and has been found to reduce inflammation in arthritis.

Its production is really taking off in PEI. Exports are mostly to Japan. There are 40 acres presently in production and plans for expansion. There are many different types of fertility tests going on.

A mechanical harvester was purchased on the Island in 2009. Hand-harvesting has proved to be labour-intensive. It has cut harvesting time from 332 hours to 30 hours. To use the machine, one must first select cultivars that are suited for mechanical harvesting. The harvester starts 6 inches off the ground, so it misses the lower berries.

In 2008, trials on the Ben Hope variety was done on two farm sites. Researchers looked at weed control and fertility. Landscape fabric was used. Some areas had weed control, some didn't, and some areas received no fertilizers and others did.

In 2009, trials were done with the Titania variety. All the plots were covered with landscape fabric. A 50:50 mix of crab-meal and **pelletized poultry \_\_\_** was used.

Researchers measured whips, height and soil samples. Measurements were done monthly. For the Ben Hope trials, the plots with no weed control had reduced growth. Supplemental fertility did not increase the bush size. Fish fertilizer did increase the leaf nitrogen content.

#### **In the Titania trials, ?**

The bottom line is that the focus needs to be on giving the plant a good start. Early fertilizer can increase the bush size.

Future trials will look at fertilizing in the spring only, as well as fertilizing in the fall only, and split application (spring as well as fall).

Issues of concern are the weed control options. You need to eliminate weeds prior to planting and keep free of weeds throughout the season, and maintain a 3 foot wide weed free zone. What also needs to be figured out is what is more economical.

For 2010:

- no weed control
- mowing
- cultivated/tillage
- landscape fabric
- black plastic (PVC not allowed)
- acetic acid

For disease control, there are not many diseases or pests in North America. American powdery mildew is a white powdery growth on the leaves, shoots and fruit that changes to dark brown as the plant matures. The white pine blister rust is a disease caused by fungus (*cronartium ribicole*). The currants are an

alternative host with the white pine. Tiny yellowish spots show up on the upper side of the leaves, and orange-yellow spots on the bottom. It causes premature defoliation and can affect next year's yield. It affects mostly the Ben Hope variety.

There are not many organic controls for the disease. Sulphur and mineral oil have been found to have some effect. The best is to select the right cultivar. Titania, Coronet, Crusader and Consort seem to be immune in Europe. It is not quite the case here, we still need to study the cultivars here.

When selecting cultivars, examine: disease resistance, frost tolerance, taste, use, growth habit, harvest time and harvest type.

Cultivars: Ben Alder, Ben Connan, Ben Hope, Ben Tirran, Whistler, Ben Lomond, Titania, Ben .....

Not many are available in North America as of yet. We still need to try different varieties.

The optimum pH is 5.7 to 6.5. The closest propagators are located in Quebec.