

***Ribes aureum* Pursh**  
GROSSULARIACEAE

golden currant

Synonyms: *Chrysobotrya aurea* (Pursh.) Rydb.

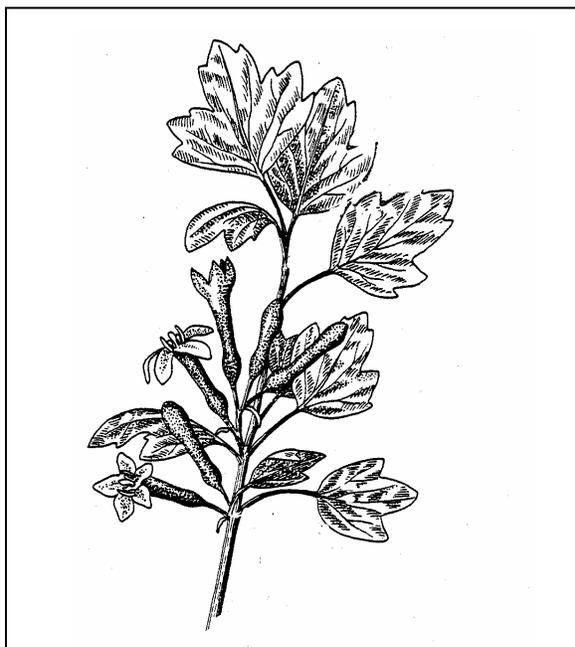


Illustration credit: J. Shoemaker in Wasser 1982

**General Description.**—*Ribes aureum* Pursh. is commonly known as golden currant, but local names also include buffalo, flowering, fragrant, and clove currant (Elmore 1976). The species name “*aureum*” is derived from the Latin word for “golden-yellow” and refers to the rich-yellow colored flowers. In some areas flowers may also be a cream or reddish color (Derig and Fuller 2001). The derivation of “*Ribes*” is apparently debatable. Gledhill (1992) suggests it is derived from the Persian word for “acid-tasting” whereas Vines (1986) indicates “*Ribes*” may be derived from an ancient Danish name. Another likely derivation is a link to historical cultural use. In the Middle East, a popular syrup was made from an Oriental species of rhubarb (*Rheum ribes*) called “*Ribas*” (USDA FS 1988, ISTA 1968). In Western Europe, currants were substituted for the rhubarb in this prized juice, and apparently this use influenced Linnaeus to adopt “*Ribes*” as the generic name for currants (USDA FS 1988). Golden currant is a deciduous, unarmed (spineless) shrub. It is usually from 60 cm to 3 m tall but may grow to a little over 4 m. The light green, semiglossy leaves are usually three-lobed. The flowers are large (up to 9 mm long) and each has five petals. They are solitary or in erect clusters, or racemes, of up to 15 flowers. The smooth,

hairless, spherical fruit is a juicy several-seeded berry approximately 0.5 to 1.5 cm across and variously colored from yellow, red, brown to black. This description is after Carter 1997, Cronquist and others 1997, Hitchcock and Cronquist 1973, and Vines 1986. Kartesz (1994) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (2003) database PLANTS recognize three varieties: the type variety *aureum*, variety *gracillimum* (Coville and Britt.) Jepson that is synonymous with *Ribes gracillimum*, and variety *villosum* DC that is synonymous with *Ribes odoratum* H. Wendl. Despite some confusing references to the contrary, *Ribes aureum* var. *aureum* is not a synonym of *Ribes odoratum*. The likely source of the taxonomic confusion is that *Ribes odoratum* H. Wendl is synonymous with *Ribes aureum* Gray, as opposed to the more familiar and taxonomically accepted, *Ribes aureum* Pursh.

**Range.**—Golden currant, *Ribes aureum* var. *aureum*, is a wide-ranging species across Western North America (Cronquist and others 1997). It is common from Alberta, Canada, to western Texas (Kershaw and others 1998, Powell 1998). *Ribes aureum* var. *odoratum* is native to mid-America, west of the Great Lakes (Cronquist and others 1997). Both varieties have become naturalized in Europe and possibly in other parts of the world (Stace 1997, Cronquist and others 1997, Komarov 1939).

**Ecology.**—Golden currant grows along water courses and in moist meadows in a variety of vegetation communities from grasslands, shrub lands, piñon juniper woodland, western hardwood, pine, and fir-spruce forests (Marshall 1995, Dick-Peddie 1992, Welsh and others 1993). Common associates include rabbitbrush (*Chrysothamnus* species), maples (*Acer* species), serviceberry (*Amelanchier* species), chokecherry (*Prunus virginiana* L.), juniper (*Juniperus* species), ponderosa pine (*Pinus ponderosa* P. & C. Lawson), willows (*Salix* species), and cottonwoods (*Populus* species). The elevation at which it occurs tends to depend somewhat upon latitude, but generally plants are found between approximately 400 to 2,800 m (Cronquist and others 1997, Carter 1997, Powell 1998). Golden currant grows in full sunlight but also does well in partial shade (Tykač 1990). It is tolerant to a range of weakly acid (pH 6) to weakly basic soils (Wasser

1982). Bacterial diseases have been noted to infect canes of some genotypes, but resistant varieties are available (Wasser 1982). *Ribes* species are intermittent hosts of the white pine blister rust (*Cronartium ribicola*), a fungal pathogen that can be ruinous to most native white pine species. Because of this, *Ribes* species have been subject to specific eradication programs in many white pine (*Pinus monticola* Dougl. ex D. Don) regions (Martin and others 1951, Van Arsdel and others 1998). However, the significance of specifically golden currant in the life cycle and pathology of this rust is uncertain. Throughout the Sacramento Mountains of New Mexico, *R. pinetorum* Greene was a major contributor to the spread of rust to nearby pines, but blister rust was not found on golden currant that generally grew below the elevation of the pines (Van Arsdel and others 1998).

**Reproduction.**—Golden currant generally flowers in June through August, although flowers may be found from March until the first frost (Epple 1995, McGregor and others 1986, USDA FS 1988, Vines 1986). The fragrant flowers are insect pollinated. Some insects have adapted to the long narrow flower tube by boring a hole at its base to “steal” the nectar (Derig and Fuller 2001). Golden currant readily crosses with other *Ribes* species (Wasser 1982). The fruits mature in summer and fall. The seed is a densely hairy achene. The cleaned seed averages approximately 478,398 to 513,672 individuals per kg with a germination rate of 60 to 98 percent (Vines 1986, Wasser 1982). The seeds undergo a physiological dormancy that is broken by 60 days of cold stratification (Baskin and Baskin 2001). Germination is epigeal. The plant also spreads by growing shoots from rhizomes (Wasser 1982).

**Growth and Management.**—Golden currant is easily propagated from hardwood cuttings in June or September and bare rooted plants are best planted when leafless in the spring or fall (Tykač 1990). When starting plants from seed, fall seeding is preferred, but stratified seed can be planted in the spring (Wasser 1982). Golden currant is used as a rootstock for grafting on other species of currant that root poorly (Tykač 1990). Cutting back old shoots stimulates new growth, and plants can sprout after fire (Tykač 1990, Marshall 1995). Tolerance to fire in the dormant state is good (Wasser 1982). However, the severity, or heat, of the fire is likely to be important to survival, and very hot fires can kill shrubs completely (Marshall 1995).

**Benefits.**—Golden currant rates from “poor” and “fair” to “medium” palatability for cattle (Dayton

1931, USDA FS 1988). It has good palatability for sheep (Dayton 1931). In Montana, twigs and foliage can make up to 2 to 5 percent of a sheep’s diet (Martin and others 1951). The fruits are an important food source for a variety of wildlife such as songbirds, chipmunks, mice, and ground squirrels (Martin and others 1951, Marshall 1995, Tykač 1990). The fruits may contribute up to 10 percent of a chipmunk and ground squirrels’ diet (Martin and others 1951). Both fruit and foliage are used by a range of species that include grouse, coyote, and beaver (Martin and others 1951). Elk have been reported to eat the foliage in Colorado, and one report indicated that mule deer browsed it infrequently, but cattle not at all, during a 1-year study in Montana (Dusek 1975). Golden currant has been planted for erosion control and in restoration projects (Vines 1986, Wasser 1982). It is particularly used for restoration of game habitat (Wasser 1982). When golden currant is used in vegetation restoration projects it is usually a small component of the seed mix and used at approximately 461 to 922 grams per hectare (Wasser 1982). The berries, both fresh, dried, and made into jams and cakes, have been used for food by many Native American tribes as well as by European settlers (Elmore 1976, Moerman 1998, Welsh and others 1993). It has also been used as a pharmaceutical by some of the tribes of the Great Plains. The dried, pulverized inner bark was sprinkled on sores, used with other ingredients in a poultice, and a decoction was taken for leg swelling (Moerman 1998). The flowers are edible, apparently flavorful, and eaten by gourmets (Elmore 1976). Golden currant is a popular ornamental plant in North America, Europe, and parts of the former Soviet Union (Bailey and others 1976, Komarov 1939, Tykač 1990).

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