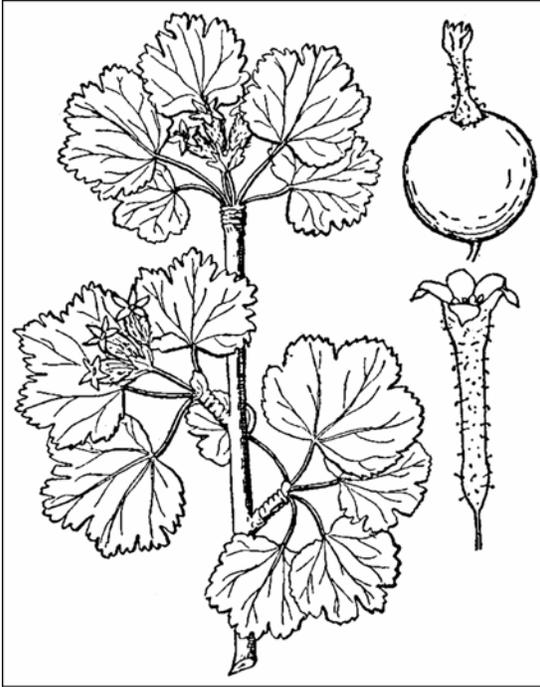


***Ribes cereum* Dougl.**
GROSSULARIACEAE

wax current

Synonyms: *Ribes inebrians* Lindl.
Ribes cereum Dougl. var. *inebrians* (Lindl.) C.L. Hitchc.



Drawing source: Britton and Brown 1913

General Description.—Wax current, also known as squaw current, is a deciduous shrub 0.5 to 1.5 m in height. Plants support one to several stems and are unarmed, dark gray to brown, sticky, and hairy when young, becoming glabrous with age. The yellow-green to grayish-green, simple leaves are circular to kidney-shaped with three to seven shallow lobes and a fine toothed or rounded-toothed margin. Petioles are 0.4 to 2.2 cm long and blades are 0.5 to 2.5 long and 0.7 to 3.0 cm broad. Inflorescences are two- to four-flowered racemes that are shorter than the leaves. The 4- to 7-mm long, glandular, tubular, greenish-white to pale pink flowers have five tiny petals. Fruits (berries) are red, shiny, and 6 to 8 mm in diameter. Each fruit contains several rough-surfaced, elliptical seeds about 2.5 mm long. There are $2n = 16$ chromosomes (Abrams 1944, Brayshaw 1996, Mesler and Sawyer 2003, Pfister 1974, Welsh and others 1987).

Range.—Wax current is native to the states of Washington, Oregon, California, Nevada, Utah,

Arizona, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Nebraska, as well as the provinces of British Columbia and Alberta. There are three recognized varieties. Variety *cerium* is apparently found in all the range except Oklahoma. Variety *colubrinum* C.L. Hitchc. occurs in Washington, Oregon, Idaho, (and probably British Columbia). Variety *pedicellare* Brewer & S. Wats., known as whisky current, occupies the range east and south of Washington and Oregon (Natural Resources Conservation Service 2003).

Ecology.—Wax current is most common and grows best in the open but it can grow under open conifer forest canopies. It therefore classifies as intolerant of shade. New seedlings appear after fires (that may scarify seeds) and when the soil is disturbed and opened to sunlight (Marshall 1995). The species grows on well-drained soils of the full range of textures that have developed from a wide variety of parent materials. These soils are often rocky or gravelly. Wax current grows at elevations of 1,500 to 4,000 m (Marshall 1995) in areas with warm, dry to moist summers and cool to cold winters. Minimum annual precipitation is around 330 mm/year. Wax current occurs in many vegetation types including open and broken coniferous forests, exposed subalpine slopes and ridges, and sagebrush (*Artemisia* spp.) steps (author's observation).

Reproduction.—Wax current flowers between April and June and ripens fruit in August (Pfister 1974). Flowers are pollinated by insects (Plants For a Future 2003). There was an average of 553,000 seeds/kg from fruits collected in California (Pfister 1974). Seeds are dispersed by birds and small mammals, as well as by gravity (Marshall 1995). At 21 °C, air-dried seeds retained some viability for 27 years (Pfister 1974). Reproduction is mainly by seed; the species has only a “weak” ability to sprout from the root crown (Marshall 1995).

Growth and Management.—Fruits must generally be picked by hand. Seeds are cleaned of

fruit by maceration, and air dried. They can be stored in sealed containers at ambient temperatures or refrigerated (Pfister 1974). Seeds require 4 to 5 months of cold stratification (at temperatures near freezing) after which they can be planted in the spring (Marshall 1995). Alternately, they can be sown in the fall and allowed to stratify naturally. Plants can also be started from cuttings of semi-hardened wood (Plants For a Future 2003). Adult plants can be eliminated from stands by fire, grubbing, and probably herbicides. However, in at least one study, because many new seedlings appeared, the number of plants increased in sites disturbed by treatments (Marshall 1995). Because wax current does poorly in shade, tree planting is suggested as a long-term solution.

Benefits.—Wax current contributes to the beauty of forest lands where it grows and helps protect the soil from erosion. Shade from their crowns shelters conifer seedlings and thus aids forest succession (Marshall 1995). The species is used to a limited extent as a foundation plant in formal landscaping (Wildland Nursery 2003). Wax current is fair to poor browse for domestic livestock and wild ungulates and is mainly eaten when little else is available. New annual growth contains about 5.6 percent protein. Several species of birds and rodents consume the fruits (Marshall 1995). The larva of the Rocky Mountain *Agapema* moth (*Agapema homogena* Dyar) feed on the foliage (Oehlke 2003). Wax current berries are edible but have little flavor. They are picked for making jams, jellies, and pies and were formerly used by Native Americans for making pemmican (Marshall 1995). People of the Secwepemc tribe of British Columbia ate them to relieve diarrhea (Secwepemc Nation 2003). An infusion of inner bark was used as a wash for sore eyes (Plants For a Future 2003). Wax current and other *Ribes* species are alternate hosts for white pine blister rust (*Cronartium ribicola*), which can be lethal to five-needle pines. Efforts to eradicate *Ribes* from several forest areas failed and did not decrease the incidence of blister rust (Marshall 1995).

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