

Sweet Rewards

Growing Berries on the Suburban Farm

by MICHAEL BROWN

Growing up in central New Jersey, I've seen large expanses of former farmland transformed into seemingly endless residential sprawl. While this doesn't bode well for open space (as well as a host of other things), it does present opportunity for those able to attract these new potential customers. One way is by creating a suburban farm. Such a farm, on less than an acre, allows spry and innovative farmers to use small size and proximity to markets to their advantage.

Eight years ago, after my youngest child neared the end of high school, I decided to expand my love of gardening into a business. I started off small – about a tenth of an acre in part of my backyard. I named my suburban farm “Pitspone Farm” – from a Hebrew word meaning very small. Over the years I slowly expanded, until at this point I've more or less taken over my entire backyard, about one-third of an acre.

From time to time customers come to my farm to pick up produce or visit my operation. Invariably I'll get a call as they sit in their car in front of my house: “Hi, I'm not sure we're in the right place. This looks like a residential area.” At that point I usually come out from the back to greet and reassure them that they are indeed in the right place. From the front my home looks like a typical residence. All the action is in the back.

My goal has been, and continues to be, to explore the model of a small-scale suburban farm, both as an income-producing entity and as a contributor to the food supply. This model might be of interest to people in several types of circumstances:

1. Not everyone is lucky enough to find large, affordable acreages for farming. However, many of us liv-

ing in the suburbs have easy access to enough land for a suburban farm.

2. A suburban farm can be a useful way to transition into larger acreage, by establishing markets and experimenting with various crops.

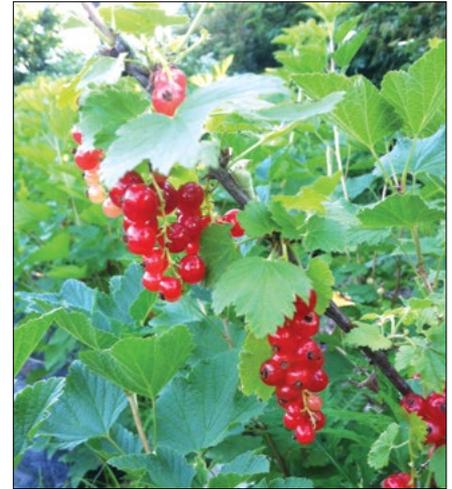
3. A small suburban farm allows one to work a farm while holding down an additional job.

PREPARATION

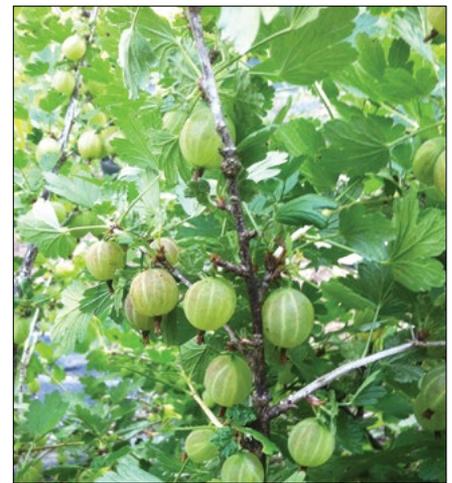
Because my property is zoned residential, one of the first things I did was contact my local municipality to ask about zoning. I explained what I wanted to do and asked if there would be any problems. The answer I received was: “If nobody complains, then we don't have any reason to cause you problems.” With that in mind, I've labored to be a good neighbor – a good goal in any case. I produce no noise from animals or motorized equipment, I don't spray chemicals, and any noise I do create (like hammering posts), I do at times that people are up and about. Once in awhile I do have customers come to my home, but they don't cause a disturbance.

Improvements on my land include additional water spigots and fencing to keep out deer. I chose conventional stockade fencing common on residential properties. While deer can jump this fence, the fact that they can't see over it, along with plenty of other food options in the neighbors' yards, has prevented problems.

I am constantly amending the soil with horse manure (look for a nearby horse boarding operation), wood chips and leaves. In the fall I've been known to cruise around in my truck picking up bagged leaves that people leave by the curb. This does cause a small inconvenience because I can't dump anything straight into the backyard. I bring in everything with a wheelbar-



Ripening 'Red Lake' red currants.



'Hinnomaki Red' gooseberries that have yet to ripen.

row. By the way, one of my early purchases, and indispensable to me, was a small truck for hauling manure, plants, wood chips, etc.

BERRIES & SMALL FRUIT

During my time farming, I have constantly been exploring the best crop mix and marketing strategies for my markets. I started out growing primarily vegetables for restaurants. Eventually I decided that there might be other models better suited to my situation, and I became interested in

PHOTOS BY MICHAEL BROWN

small fruits and berries. I have now transitioned to only growing small fruits and berries – both fruit and plants.

The more I explored the world of berries, the more I began to understand how limited most American consumers are in their knowledge and experience of these healthy and tasty foods. Additionally, many of the berries and small fruit I grow are unavailable to consumers, even in high-end supermarkets. My location in central New Jersey places me approximately 1 hour from both Philadelphia and New York, as well as within half an hour from several medium-sized towns or small cities.

Why did I decide on berries? First of all, my limited amount of land dictates a high-value crop. Since I'm a one-person operation, I need to grow high-value crops that also emphasize the advantages of proximity to markets, such as short shelf-life berries. On the other hand, many berries can also be frozen, especially those used primarily for processing such as elderberry and aronia. This allows for greater flexibility in sales and reduces waste.

I've also decided to grow a mix instead of just one particular crop. This allows me to proceed from harvest to harvest as each kind of berry ripens. I begin with haskaps and end with fall raspberries. By having relatively small harvests I can sell much of my crop retail and also easily sell out each harvest.

PRICING

Determining prices for berries can be a challenge, especially for berries that are not available locally and for which I am the only local grower.

One place to start is the 2012 Berry Pricing Survey from Cornell University, though it is somewhat limited, and perhaps dated. Grower associations can also provide guidance on pricing. In the end, much of my pricing is trial and error and is dictated in large part by customer feedback.

GOOSEBERRIES

Gooseberries come in an amazing variety of sizes, textures and colors. The plants are also diverse in their

growing habit. Some plants are vigorous and upright, others are small and spreading. Some are very spiny and others have almost no spines. There is also a difference in disease resistance among the various cultivars.

Yields

Average yield for my gooseberries seems to be 3-5 lbs/plant. Once the plants reach full production I expect more consistency toward the top of that range.

Markets

Until I started growing gooseberries a few years ago I had never seen a gooseberry, much less knew what it tasted like or what to do with it. However, there are a lot of people within driving distance of my farm who are very familiar with gooseberries and who will eagerly buy them. Many of these people are buying memories – they remember their mom's gooseberry jam, their grandfather's berry bushes in the old country, or eating fresh gooseberry tarts as a youngster. American growers have largely ignored gooseberries, but that doesn't mean everybody else has also forgotten them. If you have any eastern European communities near your farm, then there is an eager market for these fruits. The only problem I have with gooseberries is that I can't seem to grow enough of them.

A word of caution before you jump into gooseberries, or any other crop for that matter: Start small. The market in my area is very diverse and upscale. Other markets may not respond in a similar manner.

Pricing

I sell gooseberries both wholesale and retail. For wholesale I charge \$5-\$5.25/pint, which is about 12 oz. For retail I charge \$7.50/pint.

Gooseberry Cultivars

Here are some gooseberry cultivars. All are vigorous and disease-resistant. They are presented in order of ripening. This is just a sampling. Many more cultivars are available.

'Invicta'. New variety that produces abundant yields of large, pale green berries. The plant is vigorous and spreading and is mildew resistant. It does have large thorns.

'Hinnomaki Red'. One of the most common cultivars, it is disease

resistant and productive, though fairly thorny. I prune mine to create an open center. This both increases air circulation, reduces disease and eases harvesting of the reddish, medium-sized berries. The bush grows to about 4 feet tall and wide. If you are letting it grow as a multiple-stem bush they can be spaced about four feet.

'Tixia'. Not as common as 'Hinnomaki,' but certainly available at some nurseries. This plant is a bit larger – up to about 5 feet tall and 4 feet or so wide. It grows more upright. The berries are large, about the size of a grape, and they are suitable as a dessert berry when fully ripe. I've found production to be moderate. They are less thorny than 'Hinnomaki'.

'Black Velvet'. Very vigorous upright growth with small/medium black berries. The plants are vigorous and the berry has very good flavor. The thorny bushes need to be kept pruned for ease of harvest.

'Jeanne'. Available in some nurseries. This cultivar was introduced several years ago by the USDA. The medium-sized red berries ripen late in the season and are a good variety to use to prolong the season. Also up to about 5 feet with spacing of 4 feet.

ARONIA

Aronia has been touted as the next superberry, and indeed the health attributes of the berry are the strongest hook for sales. The berries are astringent and not particularly tasty, although they are pleasant enough in small quantities. The plants grow vigorously, have few diseases or pests and are very productive. They eventually reach a height of 6-8 feet. They should be spaced 4-5 feet. Aronia berries are used extensively for their juice and are usually mixed with other fruits or berries.

The main commercial cultivar is 'Viking.' Other cultivars include 'Galicjanka,' 'Nero' and 'Mackenzie.' According to Dr. Mark Brand of the University of Connecticut, all of the named aronia cultivars are genetically identical. His lab at the University of Connecticut recently began a long-term project whose objective is the breeding of improved aronia cultivars

SMALL-SCALE SUCCESS

for the commercial fruit and ornamental industries.

Yields: My plants last year averaged almost 10 lbs/plant, and they are not yet producing at full capacity. The literature talks about yields of 15-20-plus lbs/plant at full capacity, which is after growth of 7-8 years. Within two growing seasons you can expect yields of 3-4 lbs/plant.

Markets: My customers generally put aronia in smoothies or in something like oatmeal instead of blueberries. They don't generate the same memories as some of my other berries, but they are popular with some East European communities to use in making tinctures or drinks and they are also in demand with herbalists. I've found a good deal of interest in my local Asian communities, specifically because of their health attributes.

Pricing: I charge \$4-\$5/pound for fresh or freshly frozen berries but the price could be as low as \$2-\$3 for larger amounts for wine or jams.

RED CURRANTS

Red currants are easy to grow and they are productive. I only grow red currants. Black currants are not permitted in New Jersey, though I do get a lot of requests for them. (Black currants are the most susceptible of the Ribes species for the rust fungus that causes white pine blister rust. Before you plant any Ribes – currant, gooseberry or jostaberry check your local regulations.)

Yields: My plants generally yield 4-5 lbs/plant. At full production, they can produce as much as 10 pounds or more per plant.

Markets: Red currants are another berry well-known by Europeans and generally unavailable fresh.

Pricing: I sell most of my currants wholesale at \$5-\$5.50/pint, which is about 8 oz. Retail is \$7.50/pint.

By transforming your typical suburban yard into a productive small business, you can positively contribute to the local food supply, generate income and break out of the mold of the perfect weed-free lawn with manicured shrubs and trees.

NEED MORE INFORMATION?

Pitspone Farm specializes in a wide range of small fruits and berries — both fruits and plants. More information at pitsponefarm.com.