

## Picking Gooseberries: 20 Paragraphs

I JUST FINISHED HARVESTING a pint of black and golden champagne raspberries growing in our backyard. A hot and muggy evening, it only took a few minutes for me to be drenched in sweat. It was also a few minutes past sundown and the mosquitoes were out, the females looking for blood. If my wife had been present, the mosquitoes would have found her more appealing, but I was harvesting alone and had become by default their prime candidate. We usually don't have many mosquitoes around the house, but our raspberry/gooseberry/currant patch is a wild, shady area that serves as an appealing breeding ground. Around sunrise and sunset at this time of year, the Culicidae relish the arrival of a warm-blooded mammal, but at these hours of the day I rarely stay long, and I try to keep moving. Fortunately the raspberry picking can go rather quickly. The bed is relatively narrow and I can walk around the perimeter without needing to dive into the bushes and awaken any mosquitoes not finished with their afternoon siesta. Occasionally the berries are hiding behind the leaves, but the majority are easy to spot. This is my first day of picking and the harvest is small, finished in five minutes. Since the raspberries quickly change from ripe to over-ripe, the berries will need to be harvested every two days for the next two weeks. I will soon shift my gathering time to the noon hour, when our neighborhood's mosquitoes are less blood-thirsty. It was usually during the noon hour, the last two weeks, when I was harvesting gooseberries. Gooseberry picking is slow and requires standing still, surrounded by the well-armed gooseberry bushes. I have always preferred the mosquitoes not assist me with that harvest.

THE OED OFFERS A FEW ETYMOLOGICAL SPECULATIONS on the history of the name "gooseberry" but nothing definitive. One possibility is that the word is a corruption of "gorseberry." As someone who has hiked through fields covered with gorse, I can confirm the two plants share sharp similarities. But the OED reminds us the "goose" may simply refer to the common bird: "the grounds on which plants and fruits have received names associating them with animals are so commonly inexplicable, that the want of appropriateness in the meaning affords no sufficient ground for assuming that the word is an etymological corruption." I suspect a more promising etymological path is to consider the plant's historic European names. One old German name for the berries was *Kräuselbeere*, which translates "curled or crimped berries." We encounter similar names for the fruit in Medieval Latin (*grossularia*), Middle Dutch (*croesel*), and Old French (*grosele*). In French, red currants are *groseilles* and gooseberries are called *groseilles à maquereau* (mackerel gooseberries) because they were traditionally prepared with mackerel. It would be a natural linguistic evolution for an English gardener to plant a "gooseberry" and then casually drop the "r."

THE FIRST TIME I EVER SAW a gooseberry bush or picked fresh gooseberries was in late June or early July, 1966, while spending the weekend at my fiancé's family farm. Her mother sent us off with a pail on a bright sunny morning to harvest gooseberries growing along a fence between a cow pasture and the gravel road that led to the farmhouse. The gooseberries were small and green and well protected by small thorns, like harvesting a fruit surrounded by barbed wire. But I was in love with my fellow picker, and it was more pleasant work than on

## Picking Gooseberries

another weekend when her father handed us hoes and suggested it was a nice day for chopping out weeds in the milo. At least with gooseberries, we were acquiring food for a future pie. I do wonder how those gooseberry plants ended up along this fence. According to my wife, the first bush was not intentionally planted; it just appeared one day. I later learned there was a larger patch of gooseberries along the creek, up toward the Haverkamp place, but I never saw those berries. I'm intrigued that the gooseberries we were picking in the 1960s were growing in the full Kansas sun without an ounce of shade. In contrast, the gooseberries in our backyard live under a maple tree and receive almost no direct sunlight. One must admire a plant that can thrive in such different environments.

ONE OLD GERMAN NAME FOR THE GOOSEBERRY was *Klosterbeeren* (monastery berries), because monks in their monasteries were among the first to cultivate gooseberries. Germans now refer to the plants as *Stachelbeeren*, which translates thornberries, a name first appearing in written texts in the 1600s. Although gooseberries are now widely grown in northern Europe (including Scandinavia), it's not clear that they were often cultivated as a food source in the Middle Ages; however, the fruit had a medical reputation. The berry's acidic juice was prescribed to counteract fevers. This herbal property probably explains why the fruit was known as "Fea-berry," a name apparently still surviving in some provincial dialects.

"OLD GOOSEBERRY" was a medieval name for the Devil. The Kiwi fruit was once known as the "Chinese gooseberry." To "play gooseberry" refers to the role of someone who serves as a chaperone for a romantic couple while appearing to be occupied in some other occupation—such as reading a book or picking gooseberries. As for the history of the word "fool" in "gooseberry fool," a fool would be an English dessert of cooked and pureed fruit mixed with a sweet custard or whipped cream. According to the Wikipedia, "Foole is first mentioned as a dessert in 1598 (together with trifle), although the origins of gooseberry fool may date back to the 15th century. The earliest recipe for fruit fool dates to the mid 17th century." Although it's not clear why the word "fool" was chosen to identify a type of dessert, one contributor to the on-line encyclopedia suggests that "it is derived from the Arabic dish known as a ful, or foul (pronounced fool). A ful is a common Middle Eastern dish that has been around since Biblical times, most commonly made from cooked softened and mashed beans, flavoured with garlic or spices or even cream or laban. While the ingredients may be different, the concept and preparation of the Middle Eastern vegetable foul and the English fruit fool are remarkably similar, suggesting that this is the origin of the term."

MY MOTHER NEVER MADE GOOSEBERRY PIES, but a cook at Winn's Café in my hometown in southeastern Kansas made them. I was not an adventurous eater, but as a young boy I tried a gooseberry pie and liked it, perhaps attracted by the sweet tartness of the custard filling surrounding the gooseberries. And so, on occasion, in the summer, in a restaurant, after finishing off my chicken fried steak (the epitome of haute cuisine for a Kansas farm boy), I would order for dessert a slice of gooseberry pie.

## Picking Gooseberries

WHEN OUR DAUGHTER WAS IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, there was a big craze for hand-made dolls known as Cabbage Patch Kids. As part of a clever marketing strategy, children were told the dolls, born in a garden of cabbages, could not be purchased but could be adopted. According to the *Oxford Dictionary of Plant Lore*, British folklore includes references to babies being found under gooseberry bushes, perhaps offering a way for parents to avoid explaining to young children how babies were delivered by storks. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century "Gooseberry bush" became a slang term for pubic hair. Could there be a crude joke behind the idea of gooseberry bushes protecting babies prior to adoption?

HERE'S ANOTHER PASSAGE from the *Oxford Dictionary of Plant Lore*, describing the British passion for gooseberries:

During the eighteenth century the growing and exhibiting of gooseberries became a passion in Cheshire, Lancashire, and the Midlands, comparable with the present-day enthusiasm for growing Leeks and Pumpkins. In the 1740s gooseberry clubs were formed in the Manchester area, and about a century later there were 722 varieties of gooseberry and 171 gooseberry shows. It seems that the enthusiasm was particularly strong among cottage-based handloom weavers. With the development of power-driven looms these weavers moved from their cottages into towns, where space for growing gooseberries was restricted. Few of the gooseberry shows survived the First World War. Today [1989] ten shows exist, one at Egton Bridge in Yorkshire and nine in Cheshire. The Egton Bridge Old Gooseberry Society, formed in 1800, currently has approximately 120 members, and holds its show on the first Tuesday in August each year.

Seven hundred and twenty-two varieties!

I PLANTED OUR GOOSEBERRIES in our backyard over 40 years ago under a large, straight-backed sugar maple tree. The gooseberry bed started with six plants--plus two red currant bushes--and they have managed to flourish with almost no care. Once a year I crawl through the area, pulling up dozens of maple seedlings and yanking up long stretches of Virginia creeper. The fertilizer comes from the thousands of maple leaves that descend each fall and create layers of nutrient-rich humus. The gooseberries will spread by layering, and on several occasions I have pulled up old bushes and replaced them with their wandering progeny, but the bushes have tended to take care of their own--and thus I have no idea the age of the oldest, grizzled warriors. Nor do I have any record of how much I paid for their ancestors. I doubt they cost more than \$15, which would suggest they have been one of my better investments made during the Jimmy Carter administration.

I WISH I KNEW WHICH OF THE 722 GOOSEBERRY VARIETIES ours might be, but when I brought home our colony's first immigrants I did not attend to their legal papers, I did not care if they were Protestant or Catholic. There's a possibility they might be Pixwells--a variety still readily available from many nurseries--but that is just a guess. I have discovered the berries need to be picked green, before they ripen--which would typically not occur until later in July. While the ripe berries are sweeter, they tend to be too soft, deteriorate quickly, and occasionally harbor

## Picking Gooseberries

a small, white worm inside the fruit. One of the green gooseberries' redeeming qualities is that when picked, they are very stable and don't mind being stored for a few days in the refrigerator before being assigned to their ultimate destination: jam, pie, sauce, or a freezer bag for later processing.

THE MIDDLE TWO WEEKS OF JUNE is our strawberry harvest, this year resulting in twenty quarts of strawberries in the freezer and a comparable number either given away or consumed in a meal or snacks between meals. The first two weeks of July is the time for our raspberry harvest, a smaller yield than the strawberries but still producing a few more bags in the freezer. In between is gooseberry picking. According to one internet source, raw gooseberries are 88% water, 10% carbohydrates, 1% protein and 0.6% fat. One hundred grams of gooseberries would provide 44 calories and be a rich source of vitamin C (33% of the Daily Value) but no other significant amounts of micronutrients. I suspect we will have ten quarts of frozen gooseberries by the time we are finished with this year's harvest.

LAST NIGHT MY WIFE AND I SAT AT OUR DINNER TABLE, watched a cooking show on TV (a show that featured preparing a Maori meal in New Zealand), and stemmed freshly picked gooseberries. The "stemming" involves a four-step process:

- Pick up one gooseberry.
- Remove the stem.
- Rotate gooseberry 180 degrees and remove dried blossom remnant. {Note: the order of steps #2 & #3 can be reversed.}
- Place gooseberry in container with other stemmed gooseberries.

These gooseberries have already been washed and inspected (removing most of the blemished ones), which means that the berries can be stemmed by feel while doing something else—such as watching Gordon Ramsay eat a live grub on the National Geographic network. It is rather tedious work—and it takes a long time to stem a half gallon container of gooseberries—but they are a wonderfully clean, smooth fruit and there is not much difficulty locating by touch their north and south poles, the tip and the tail.

HERE'S A RECENT EMAIL from a friend who lives in Chicago but grew up on a farm in north central Kansas, not far from the pasture where I first picked gooseberries. *Gooseberries? Yes, we had gooseberries. We didn't plant them, but went down to the creek and picked them off the wild bushes. Gooseberry jelly was a staple at our house; it probably was my favorite of all the jams and jelly Mom put up. We had gooseberry pies also. I still have a couple of my Mom's recipes; I never could decide if I liked best the plain fruit pie or the gooseberry cream pie. We also picked elderberry and currants for jelly along the creek and along the road. Picking the gooseberries was not a favorite job of mine because the bushes were prickly and because you could run into poison ivy or poison oak. Funny, but I don't recall ticks ever being an issue. Maybe they weren't around then? Aunt Lena and Uncle Gus had gooseberries, and I think the Lloyds picked gooseberries along the creek also. I still remember my Aunt Lena's black raspberry pie as they had planted raspberry bushes. That was a real treat.*

## Picking Gooseberries

HANDWRITTEN SIGN ON GLASS JAR OF JAM IN OUR PANTRY: *GB Jam 1/19/19 GF*

Translation: Gluten Free Gooseberry Jam prepared on 19 January 2019.

The jam's ingredient list could not be simpler: gooseberries, sugar, and water (the addition of a gel agent is not necessary because gooseberries bring to the party their own ample pectin).

### Recipe

#### Ingredients

- 2 lbs of gooseberries
- 2lbs of granulated sugar

#### Method

- Sterilize jam jars and set them in oven, upside down, at 275F.
- Wash, tip, and tail the gooseberries, discarding any that are damaged.
- Place a saucer in the freezer.
- Put gooseberries in large pan with ½ cup of water. Bring to boil and simmer until fruit is softened (about 10 minutes).
- Stir in the sugar and cook over a low heat until the sugar has dissolved. Increase heat and boil rapidly for 8-10 minutes before testing to see if set. The testing is done by removing the saucer from the freezer and dropping on it a small spoonful of jam. After allowing it to cool for a minute, push your finger through the jam. If it wrinkles it's ready; if not, boil for a few more minutes. Continue testing until the jam is ready. Note: remove the jam from the heat while you're testing to avoid overcooking.
- Once the jam is ready, turn off the heat, skim off any scum, and leave to stand for 15-20 minutes.
- Spoon the jam into sterilized jars and seal tightly with screw top lids while the jam is hot.

OUR GOOSEBERRY BUSHES DO HAVE THORNS, long and sharp. Every time I enter the patch, I know I will be pricked. The challenge is to minimize the number and severity of those pricks. My default tactic when harvesting is to lift up the end of a branch with one hand and use the other hand to gently pull on the green pearls now hanging below the branch. Each gooseberry is attached to the mother plant with a short stem and many of the gooseberries come in pairs, which notably speeds up the picking process. Many years ago I discovered that gooseberry picking is one of those rare tasks when I am equally skilled using either the right or left hand. It's in notable contrast to another occupation that occupies my time at this time of year: killing squash bugs hiding under the leaves of cucumber, melon, pumpkin, and squash vines. I am totally dependent on my right hand for grabbing the squash bug (or even better, when the rear ends of two bugs are joined together in copulation) and squeezing the green, foul-smelling goo out of their innards. Fortunately, when collecting gooseberries, each hand is equally adept.

MY FAVORITE SIGURD OLSON BOOK IS *LISTENING POINT*, and one of my favorite essays in the book introduces us to Walt Hurd and the beautiful cabin and garden he maintained at King's Point, the entry point into Canada's Quetico.. On several occasions I have traveled with a small group of college students into the Boundary Waters Canoe Wilderness Area, entering at Fall Lake and paddling our canoes up Pipestone Bay, seeking a camping site on Basswood Lake.

## Picking Gooseberries

All the lodges and buildings present on Basswood Lake in Olson's era are now gone—with one exception: Hurd's log cabin, protected by a new steel roof, remains at King's Point, as does the building where he once welcomed visitors into the Quetico wilderness area. The first time I visited at King's Point, I recall walking around the cabin and discovering the open area, surrounded by large Norways, where Hurd had his flower and vegetable garden. The open garden space is now silently slipping back into the Canadian wilderness, but in the sunshine, along one side of the cabin, was a lone survivor of Walt Hurd's garden: a gooseberry bush with fresh, green gooseberries, not quite ready for picking.

*MY STANDARD CYCLOPEDIA OF HORTICULTURE* by Liberty Hyde Bailey (3 volume edition, published by Macmillan in 1935) lists 36 *Ribes* species (plus innumerable varieties and subspecies), divided into two groups: 20 currants and 16 gooseberries. Bailey provides detailed botanical description of each species with a precision far beyond what I have observed, but I'm inclined to think his description of species #26—*Ribes hirtellum*--provides a reasonably good match with the gooseberries growing in our back yard: shrub up to 4' tall, slender branches, bristly at the base of "vigorous shoots"; lobated leaves; greenish flowers. He notes this is the most important of the edible American gooseberries, and there are in cultivation several hybrids with *R. grossularia*, the parent of the European gooseberries.

MRS. M. GRIEVE'S *A MODERN HERBAL* (first edition published by Jonathan Cape in 1931) lists over ten names for gooseberry: Fea, Feverberry, Feabes, Carberry, Groseille, Groze, Groser, Krusbaar, Deberries, Goosegogs, Honeyblobs, Feaberry. The last name was used by Gerard, who wrote in his *Herbal* (15 ) that "the fruit is much used in diners, sawces for meats and used in brothe instead of Verjuyce, which maketh the brothe not only pleasant to taste, but is greatly profitable to such as are troubled with a hot, burning ague." As a prescription against the Plague, patients were recommended to eat "Goseberries." Grieve recommends a gooseberry infusion be taken before the monthly period of "growing girls" (recipe calls for 1 oz of dried leaves with 1 point of water, dosage of one teacup three times a day).

OF THE DOZENS OF COOKBOOKS we've acquired over the years, one of our oldest is a paperback *James Beard Cookbook* purchased in the 1970s (price "\$1.50). Although we rarely consult Mr. Beard, his book did provide us with two recipes that have been mainstays of our recipe reservoir: his rice pilaff on p. 198 (precisely where the book is now split into two unequal halves) and his gooseberry fool. Here are Beard's introductory remarks on gooseberries, followed by the recipe:

*The tart green gooseberry is beginning to be a scarce item in our markets, possible because it must be cooked to be eaten. To those of us who grew up when early summer meant gooseberry season and mouth-watering gooseberry fool and jam and tarts, its disappearance is a tragic loss. Cooked gooseberries have an elegant flavor. The berries should be firm and a pale, delicate green. Avoid those that are the least bit soft.*

*GOOSEBERRY FOOL (Serves 4)*

*This recipe is very old, for Gooseberry Fool was a delicacy centuries ago.*

## Picking Gooseberries

*1 pint of gooseberries*

*Sugar*

*A few tablespoons of water*

*Whipping Cream*

*Put gooseberries in a saucepan with 1/4 cup of sugar and a few tablespoons of water. Cook very gently until the gooseberries are thoroughly done and soft enough to mush. Put them through a sieve or food mill and add sugar to taste. Whip the cream until thick but not buttery and fold the gooseberry purée through it. Chill for several hours.*

A darn good summer dessert.

MY WIFE RECENTLY REMINDED ME that Rover, their German shepherd farm dog, loved to eat fresh gooseberries off the shrub. By the time I came along, Rover had passed on and been replaced by Sandy, a friendly but boisterous German shepherd. I'm sure Sandy accompanied us when we walked up the road to harvest the summer's gooseberry crop, but I don't recall him eating any gooseberries. I suspect that for both dogs and humans, gooseberries are an acquired taste.