

FEAR OF A BLACK CURRANT

<http://ediblehudsonvalley.com/editorial/fall-2015/fear-of-a-black-currant/>

By **Abby Luby**

Uber agrarian Greg Quinn



PHOTOGRAPHS BY MEREDITH HEUER

In the small clapboard office building at Walnut Grove Farm in Staatsburg, there is a handsomely framed 2003 document brandishing a gold seal and a vintage fountain pen. The New York State Executive Chamber emblem arches over a few erudite words validated by the signature of then Governor George Pataki.

The document represents a seminal moment in the life of Greg Quinn, a black currant grower and enthusiast, because it ended a century-long ban on cultivating black currants in New York. Quinn had long crusaded to change the archaic law to give Hudson Valley growers, as well as farmers throughout the state, a much-needed economic boost. Quinn believed currants had the potential to be a \$20 million business, and he thought he could grow a highly sought after fruit.

But why was this small ebony berry banned in the first place?

BAN REVERSAL

At the beginning of the 20th century, black currant bushes were plagued with a fungal disease called white pine blister rust, which killed native white pine trees. The logging industry pressured Congress to ban black currant cultivation in 1911, allowing states on the Eastern Seaboard to tailor their own version of the law.

It took 55 years to overturn the federal ban, but New York State kept its law for another 40 years until 2002, when Quinn called attention to a fungal-resistant bush newly developed by Steve McCay, expert horticulturist and agricultural educator at Cornell University. With a \$200,000 state grant, Quinn and McCay confirmed there was a market demand for black currants. His dogged pursuit to get the law off the books earned him the moniker “nutty currant guy.”

“Changing laws is tricky and it involves a lot of legislators who otherwise have their own agendas,” Quinn says, recalling how the culture in Albany 13 years ago was much like it is today. “They are reluctant to put their necks out there for something that’s unproven and untried.”

However, Quinn finally caught the ear of State Senator William J. Larkin, Jr. (R.) of Cornwall-on-Hudson. He penned the bill that ended the ban—one of the rare times a bill passed unanimously in both houses. It was a triumph that catapulted Quinn into the limelight as an agrarian celebrity of sorts, lauded in major news outlets, 400 national and international newspapers, the front page of the Wall Street Journal, marketing shows and a feature in



Reader's Digest. Greg Quinn considers how far his currant crop has come.

TART BEGINNINGS

Quinn, 65, sports a solid physique, white hair and a close-cropped beard that frames a sanguine expression and blue eyes. He is a cross between a gentleman farmer and renaissance man compelled by literature, language and science. His numerous stories are a charmed brand of oral history. He is also a passionate devotee of growing his own food and living off the land.

Quinn calls himself a “foodie” even though his childhood bears no influence on his palate. He grew up in Connecticut in a house that doubled as a day care center where he shared his home with about 25 children. “My folks were blue collar and food was something that came out

of a can. Eating was strictly for sustenance,” he explains. But that changed when he was a young military man (seemingly involved in some aspect of espionage) in the 1970s stationed near the Bavarian border in Germany as a translator.

In Europe, Quinn tasted fresh ingredients for the first time. “It was the start of my love affair with and quest to learn about food.” After his stint in the military, Quinn went on to open a restaurant in the German village of Rimbach, and black currant bushes grew in the backyard. Naturally, he experimented with black currants in his cooking. After three years overseas, Quinn sold his restaurant and returned to New York, energized to pursue a career in both cuisine and horticulture.

During the next 25 years he delved into food and gardening, taught botanical classes at the New York Botanical Gardens and assumed the television persona of the “Garden Guy” on the WNYW Fox News channel. He had three children, and since storytelling was a big part of his own childhood, he not only made it a daily regimen for his own kids, he wrote eight children’s books about nature; the first one was scooped up and published by Scholastic (*The Garden in our Yard*, 1995).

When he learned that half of all children in this country grow up in an urban environment, he wrote about trees in *A Gift of a Tree* (Scholastic, 1994), which at the time of its publication, included tree seeds and a folded cup, enabling kids to grow a plant no matter where they lived.

“I love the written word,” he says, recalling his books as well as the garden column he once wrote for local newspapers. His voice is a prominent one, not only in the botanical world but also in the farm-to-table movement. In September of 2014, he gave a compelling TEDx talk about his experience as a black currant advocate at the Hudson Opera House to a packed audience.

Immediately after the New York law changed, Quinn was anxious to start his own business of growing and selling black currants. He and his partner, film producer Carolyn Blackwood, had purchased a farm in 1999. Based in Clinton, New York, Walnut Grove Farm is 145 acres anchored by an 1835 farmhouse with accompanying barns and outbuildings. Quinn got to work, as did other Hudson Valley farmers.

He purchased currant seedlings from Canada for his first harvest, knowing the crop would thrive in spite of lackluster Hudson Valley soil, which is full of clay and rocky with a lot of shale. “Currants are hardy and can grow in gravel,” says Quinn. “They need about 1,000 hours of cold each season.” In other words, they’re ideal for this region.

There are roughly 18 acres of black currant bushes flourishing at Walnut Grove Farm today, and 60,000 seedlings as well, some of which Quinn sells to other farmers. Quinn’s farm is the first commercial currant farm in the state, and he is always looking for new varieties. He is about to obtain an exclusive patent for six varieties of currants usually grown in Poland. “I’ll try them out, propagate them, watch for disease and see how they grow,” says Quinn.



In his dogged pursuit to change the law, Quinn's frequent treks to Albany to comb the capital hallways for any elected official who would listen, earned him the moniker "nutty currant guy."

THE NEW BLACK

Black currants have been popular in Europe for centuries, most notably in the British juice product Ribena, because currants are extremely rich in antioxidants and high in vitamin C. "While black currants were virtually nonexistent here, it has always been a huge industry throughout Europe, where there are about 193 different products using currants," Quinn asserts. "In England, Halls makes a popular, black currant cough drop and Sara Lee sells a black currant cheesecake, and curiously, the box shows an American flag," Quinn says.

Quinn labels his black currant products "CurrantC," and the product line's number one seller is the ready-to-drink beverage Black Currant Nectar. Included in the list of CurrantC's 65 products are dried berries, currant concentrate, syrups, vinegars and candles, to name a few. All the products are available on the CurrantC website and are distributed to a limited number of stores and farmers markets in the Hudson Valley.

Black currant consumption in the U.S. is on the rise thanks to the berry's medicinal properties as well as its popularity among Eastern European immigrants. Quinn says that, for years, Russians and Poles from Brooklyn descend on the farm to spend hours picking currants during the post-harvest "you pick" day. "Every year Poles come up here, swooning over the fruit. After they pick the berries, they sit by the pond, eat the fresh currants and drink vodka."

Quinn tells of one Ukrainian woman who recently asked to buy the branches of the bushes to make a tea for her two-year-old grandson suffering from painful skin rashes. "She wanted to pay for the branches," he relates. "But I told her the price is to tell me what happened to her grandson and if the tea was effective. About two months later, she called me and said it worked. The black currant branches saved her grandson from being put on prednisone."



CREATING DEMAND

Growing black currants is one thing; marketing is another endeavor. “Today, after 12 years of legally growing and selling currants, I feel like I’m still ‘sisyphus-ing,’” Quinn reflects, comparing himself to the mythical Greek king Sisyphus who was fated to push an immense bolder up a hill for all of time. Ideally Quinn would rather avoid working on what he sees as both sides of the industry. “You don’t want to grow currants and also be responsible for distributing them. Like the apple farmers, you want to raise them and sell them to a distributor, not raise, grow and sell.”

The business end is complicated: markets are fickle, establishing a product is a slow process, and ultimately it all depends on supply and demand. “If you grow a crop and it’s not a ready market item and you can’t sell it, the tendency is to drop the price. But that’s a death knell. Once you lower the price, you can’t raise it again. I always try to keep the price high to pay for all the effort that goes into growing and turning it into a saleable product,” says Quinn.

The Hudson Valley local food movement has given a boost to black currant consumption, as have regional restaurants. Wesley Dier, chef and owner of the Local and the Shelter, both in Rhinebeck, says he not only uses black currants because they are grown at Quinn’s nearby farm, but because the fruit is flavorful and versatile.

“Currants are very sturdy,” says Dier. “When you cook with them, they don’t turn to mush. The berry’s richness, a combination of sweet and tart, is truly a marriage made in heaven.” Quinn also sells currants to local mead makers, craft breweries, wineries; he processes the currants for nectar, concentrate and other products at the Micosta in Columbia County.

Quinn's passion for the black currant isn't a singular, agrarian obsession. Walnut Grove Farm functions as a microcosm, an illuminating lens through which he keeps tabs on the nuanced changes of the planet, and is also a swath of earth he can mold to his liking. Here is where the troubled honeybee can flourish in a specially planted, six-acre field sprouting 53 varieties of wild flowers.

Accompanying the bees are other insects who become a smorgasbord for a variety of birds. In another field, 200 foot rows of newly planted Riesling grapes grow from an eight-foot trench Quinn dug and then refilled with special soil to foster good growth. He also intends to tap into the farm's maple trees and make maple water to possibly market under the CurrantC label. Just beyond the farmhouse is a blueberry patch protected by bird netting, a large vegetable garden and a small orchard of fruit trees growing apples, peaches, plums, cherries and pears. It's all part of Quinn's vision for a sort of agrarian respite from a chaotic world.

"It's hard for me to do anything on a small scale," admits Quinn. "I'm in awe of the agrarian life. This is a magical place. It's all about connecting to the land and it all comes back to food."

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