Blackcurrant (Rubus nigrum)

Final Trials Report

2009 – 2012

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The Royal Horticultural Society Garden, Wisley, Woking, Surrey, GU23 6QB
RHS Trial of Blackcurrant

Introduction to *Rubus nigrum* Blackcurrant

Ribes can be deciduous or evergreen shrubs, sometimes spiny, with simple, usually palmate lobed leaves and small tubular or bell-shaped, solitary or racemose flowers borne in spring or summer, followed by juicy, edible berries.

*Ribes* nigrum or Blackcurrant is a species of *Ribes* berry native to central and northern Europe and northern Asia and is a perennial.

Objectives

The objectives of the trial were:

- Assess and judge a range of more recent cultivars for the Award of Garden Merit (AGM).
- Recommend cultivars suitable for the amateur gardener.
- To demonstrate cultivation of Blackcurrant.
- To compile information & photographs for inclusion in a Trial Report.

Evaluation

The Fruit Trials Forum assessed entries in the trial for the Award of Garden Merit on the following dates:

2010: 30th June, 14th July, 18th August, 13 October.
2011: 22nd June, 6th July, 12 October.
2012: 4th July, 18th July.

The judging criteria were as follows:

- Fruit quality - size, appearance, taste eaten fresh and cooked
- Yield - weight/plant, weight/variety; percentage waste;
- Plant habit and vigour;
- Ease of picking;
- Pest and disease resistance;
- Duration of fruiting Season.

Cooked samples were tasted with standard amount of added sugar. Test for Brix values were undertaken each year to estimate sugar levels in fresh juice and colour of fresh juice also noted. A ‘Brix test is an analysis of the sugar content of an aqueous solution using one gram of sucrose in 100 grams of solution and represents the strength of the solution as percentage by weight. For blackcurrants the levels varied from 10-11, which is not at all sweet, to about 17, which is sweet.
Entries
There were 12 entries in the trial, which were submitted by various commercial growers across the UK, listed as supplying certified stock in the DEFRA Plant Health Propagation Scheme list. Eight plants of each cultivar were grown with 16 plants of ‘Ben Sarek’ used as a guard row plant on either side of trial. One bush of Ben Gairn was excluded from the trial as it was found to be a rogue.

Cultivation
Prior to planting, the trial site was prepared by sub-soiled & digging to break up soil and incorporating well-rotted manure and pine duff (to acidify).

Hardwood cuttings received and planted on Deer’s Farm February 2008. Ebony was sourced as plants from R W Walpole & Son in November 2008. The Trial cultivars were planted on the trial site in the Fruit Garden in April 2009.

Soil analysis was undertaken to establish nutrient levels and slow release fertiliser applied at planting with an overall mulch of wood chip & bark to help suppress weeds. The following granular fertilisers were as applied to the Blackcurrant plot on 22 April 2009.

- Nitropal 89g/m2 (Nitrogen & trace elements)
- Kieserite at 20g/m2 (Magnesium)
- Sulphur Chips at 135g/m2

Plants were spaced 120cm (4ft) between plants and 180cm (4ft 9”) between rows with a permanent drip irrigation put in place at the base of the plants.

The first crop was taken in 2010.

A fruit cage to protect the ripening fruit was installed June 2010. Birds are one of the biggest problems for all soft fruit, including blackcurrants.

Pest and Disease
The following pests and diseases were encountered during the trial:

- **Red currant blister aphid** – treated using *Amblyseius cucumeris* and *Amblyseius andersonii* (predatory mites) as bio control.
- **American Gooseberry Mildew** was treated using Potassium bicarbonate.
- **Currant blister aphids** were treated with Aphox (Pirimicarb).
- **Black currant gall mite** was removed.
- **Botrytis** was present especially in 2012 following frosts.

**Currant blister aphid**: (*Cryptomyzus ribis*) is a sap-sucking insect that infests the young foliage, lower leaf surface in early summer and causes leaf distortion, causing puckered, reddish or yellowish leaves at the shoot tips, although the plant’s vigour and ability to bear fruit is not greatly affected.
American gooseberry mildew: *(Podosphaera* (syn. *Sphaerotheca mors-uvae*) This mildew causes a powdery grey and white fungus on leaves and stems. The mildew may also appear on fruit, causing problems with ripening.
Remedy: Cut out any infected stems or leaves you see straight away and destroy. This mildew is worse if bushes are planted close together (poor air circulation), so space bushes out when planting. You can spray infected plants with myclobutanil fungicide.

Blackcurrant gall mite: *(Cecidophyopsis ribis)* These mites infest the buds of blackcurrant bushes. The affected buds of lightly infested plants can be picked off during the winter and disposed of away from blackcurrant plants. Dispose of heavily infested plants after the fruit has been picked and replant in autumn with clean new stock. Purchase certified stock plants, as these will have been inspected on the nursery and certified as being free of big bud mite and reversion. One mite-resistant cultivar, 'Ben Hope', is available.

Blackcurrant leaf midge: *(Dasineura tetensi)* Tiny, white maggots feed on the shoot tips of blackcurrants and prevent leaves from reaching their full size. The affected leaves dry up and die. Shoot tips can also die back.
Remedy: In minor cases you can pick off the infested leaves (you will be able to see the white maggots with the naked eye). But beware that removing too many leaves will impact on the crop yield. There is no chemical control. The blackcurrants 'Ben Connan' and 'Ben Sarek' are resistant to blackcurrant gall midge.

Currant Sowthistle Aphid: *(Hypermyzus lactucae)*, are green and attack young leaves, which causes distorted leaves with yellowish mottling in late spring.

**Harvest**

**Harvest** the fruit by cutting the strigs (bunches of fruit) as they turn black. Older types of blackcurrant varieties ripen at different times, with the currants at the top of the strig ripening first. The fruit should therefore be picked individually.

Eat fresh blackcurrants within a few days of harvesting. Alternatively, they can be frozen, cooked, or made into jam or jelly.

**Terminology**

**Strigs** attach the blackcurrant flower at its base nearest the bud. Each "strig" carries from 10 to 20 flowers and some buds also produce 1 or 2 shorter secondary strigs.

Following bud burst and the emergence of the first 2 leaves, the flower clusters begin to be visible and from this stage they become susceptible to frost. The flowers change colour from pink/green to red as the clusters emerge fully to hang from the bud cluster in the characteristic "grape" stage. The flowers open in succession, starting at the base of the strig. The basal flowers are less exposed and obtain better nutrition than the tip flowers which may be frosted or fail to set fruit.
Varieties grown and bred in the British Isles are particularly rich and dark in colour, so possessing a high content of anthocyanins, which in turn promote antioxidant activity. Blackcurrants also contain more Vitamin C than any other natural food source as well as containing high concentrations of the beneficial nutrients of Potassium, Magnesium, Iron, Calcium, Vitamins A and B amongst others.

Sources: The Blackcurrant Foundation and SCRI (Scotland’s leading institute for research on plants and their interactions with the environment).

Report of the Fruit Trials Forum

A frost on 13 May 2010 during flowering severely reduced yields on many cultivars; affected the cropping of early varieties.

Frost in 2011 reduced yields on many cultivars.

The entry Ebony showed limited growth in 2011 followed by die-back of buds noted early in 2012. Samples were sent for analysis but no cause was established.

The wet summer of 2012 meant that botrytis was widespread on most cultivars. All cultivars received low scores by the Forum in 2012 for flavour, appearance, size and yield.

The wet summer of 2012 allowed cultivars to exhibit their ability to resist botrytis that was widespread throughout the trial.

Early Cultivars

‘Ebony’ (syn. ‘Bona’)
Confirmed as a very early cultivar, cropping late June/early July; ripens some 10-14 days prior to ‘Ben Connan’. Bush tends to be spreading in habit and lacking in vigour. Needs careful managing and may require support. Fruit is large and bright in appearance. It has a very sweet taste, which makes it suitable for eating fresh. Cooked, however, fruit has little characteristic blackcurrant flavour. Juice colour is pale with low Brix range 12-14. Poor growth in 2011 with noted bud die-back in 2012. First crop in 2010 was encouraging but there were low yields in the following years; suffered from botrytis in 2012. Fresh fruit flavour is exceptional good, but light crops, spreading habit and disease susceptibility ruled it out for an award of AGM. Nevertheless, because of its excellent fresh fruit flavour, the forum will continue to monitor this cultivar at Wisley and elsewhere.
'Big Ben'
A fairly vigorous medium sized bush, 5ft spread, about 4-5ft high, producing lots of new growth. Flowers early to mid-season. Ripens evenly, about 7-10 days before ‘Ben Connan’. Fruit tends to be large, for example, 100 berries weighed 227 gms. Easy to pick, but some care is needed as strig and handle are rather short. Good yields throughout trial but reduced due to botrytis in 2012; in 2011 - 3.1 kg/bush indicating yields can be high. Shows resistance to mildew and leaf spot. Rated highly for fruit appearance and fresh fruit flavour - pleasant to quite sweet. Cooked fruit flavour is rich. Juice colour pale. Brix range 12-14. Good all round cultivar, considered suitable for gardeners.

Recommended that ‘Big Ben’ should have AGM status.

‘Ben Gairn’
Produces a neat compact bush about 5/6ft across; growth variable, reasonably upright. Flowers early - first week April. Ripens a few days before ‘Ben Connan’; easy to pick. Strigs short; fruit dull, small to medium size. Overall yield during the trial was disappointing. Fresh fruit flavour was good; cooked the flavour was rich and good. Good juice colour, rather low Brix (12.5-13.0 in 2010/11).

Mid- Season Cultivars

‘Ben Connan’ (PBR) ’95 (H4)
(Ben Sarek x Ben Lomond - SCRI)
Compact, medium sized bush up to 5ft spread, 3ft high; moderately vigorous. Flowers mid-season. Harvest mid-season. Long, multi-strigged; fruit small but easy to pick. Good yields throughout trial with the highest yield in 2011 - 4.4kg/bush. Good pest and disease resistance. Flavour - sharp, good blackcurrant flavour. Cooked not too acidic but with a sharp after taste. Juice colour pale; Brix range 12-17.

Recommended that the AGM be retained.
‘Ben Sarek’ ’93 (H4)
(Goliath x Ojebyn – SCRI, 1984)
Produces a medium sized bush about 4-5ft wide with rather floppy growth. Flowers and fruits mid-season; fruits approximately 5 days earlier than ‘Ben Connan’. Short strig, difficult to pick; fruit small/ medium size. Tends to uneven ripening. Is prone to botrytis (2010 and 2012).
Typical blackcurrant flavour for fresh fruit; cooked fruit sharp with good flavour but needed more sugar than other cultivars to be good eating. Juice pale with low Brix range 12-15.
The Forum considered that there are now other cultivars that are more suitable for gardens.

Recommended that the AGM for Ben Sarek should be withdrawn.

‘Ben Hope’
A vigorous cultivar producing lots of new extension growth, which results in a very big bush up to 7ft across and 6ft high. Considered to be too vigorous for many amateur growers.
Flowers early, producing small fruit on long, easy to pick strigs.
Appears prone to uneven ripening. Ripens a few days after ‘Ben Connan’.
The highest yielding cultivar in 2010 and second highest in 2011(4.2kg/bush) and third highest in 2012.
Fresh fruit taste was reasonably good; cooked - sharp, good blackcurrant taste. Juice colour pale; Brix range 12-14.

‘Ben Lomond’ (PBR) ’93 (H4)
([Consort x Magnus] x [Brodторp x Janslunda] – SCRI, 1972)
Traditionally a medium sized bush producing reasonable yields, however, it suffered badly from mildew in 2010 and this resulted in stunted growth in 2011 with yield of 1.6 kg/bush. Ripens about the same time as ‘Ben Connan’.
Not rated highly throughout the trial.
Eating qualities low each year. Cooked - rather weak taste. Juice colour pale; Brix range 11-17.

Recommended that the AGM for Ben Lomond should be withdrawn.

‘Ben Loyal’
Produces a compact bush about 5ft spread, upright growth.
Flowering mid-season. Strigs short, fruit in clusters, short handle requires careful picking.
Fruit fit for picking about a week after ‘Ben Connan’. Fruit is medium to large and has a bright appearance; tendency to shed fruit as ripening. Can produce a good crop, as in 2010, but suffered badly from botrytis in 2012.
Fresh flavour – poor. Cooked juice flavour described as having a ‘thick’ consistency with fairly sharp, reasonable flavour. Full juice colour; high Brix range 13-16.
‘Tiben’
Makes a large vigorous bush, spreading over 7ft wide and 5ft high; produces a lot of new shoots.
Considered of doubtful value to the amateur gardener because of its vigour and size.
Flowers mid-season (late April). Strigs are long making for easy pricking and are carried proud. Ripens about 7-10 days after ‘Ben Connan’. Susceptible to frost giving a low yield in 2010, but produced a good crop in 2012 and was free relatively free from botrytis.
Fresh taste was fair and reasonable good when cooked. Produced a pale coloured juice with a low to moderate Brix ranging from 13 in 2011/12 to 16 in 2010.

‘Ben Finlay’ (Sdg 8872-1)
Produces a rather spreading bush up to 5ft wide.
Assessed as being mid to late season fruiting, ripening some 10-14 days after ‘Ben Connan’.
Fruit size small to medium; difficult to pick. Tends to shed fruit early – disappointing yield throughout the trial. Suffered from Botrytis in 2012.
Fresh and cooked flavour was poor. Juice full colour; low Brix 10-12.
Release by Scottish Crop Research Institute as “Resistant to gall mite”.

Late - Season Cultivars

‘Ben Tirran’
A compact upright bush, flowering very late (end April/early May) thus avoiding early spring frosts. Cropping at end July/early August, about 14-17 days after ‘Ben Connan’.
Fruit size medium; low to moderate crop - 2011 the yield was 1.9kg/bush.
Short strigs, rather difficult to pick.
Fresh fruit - moderate flavour. Cooked fruit taste judged good by some Forum members but others found less than pleasant after-taste rather unpleasant after taste. Low Brix range 13-15.
Nevertheless, because of its late season and that it could be very useful to many amateur gardeners; the Forum will continue to monitor this cultivar at Wisley and elsewhere.

‘Ben Maia’ (Sdg 9476-2)
Produce a dense spreading bush up to 6ft wide.
Flowers slightly early, crops mid to late season; about 5-10 days after ‘Ben Connan’.
Fruit appears dull, fairly easy to pick, taste often poor, susceptible to botrytis and each year was prone to shedding fruit.
Fresh and cooked taste poor to moderate. Brix range 14-15; Juice pale colour.
### Yields

**Punnet weight = 7g**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Big Ben</th>
<th>Ben Connan</th>
<th>Ben Gairn</th>
<th>Ben Sarek</th>
<th>Ben Hope</th>
<th>Ben Lomond</th>
<th>Ben Loyal</th>
<th>Tiben</th>
<th>Ben Tirran</th>
<th>'Ben Findley' (Sdg 8872-1)</th>
<th>'Ben Maia' (Sdg 9476-2)</th>
<th>Ebony (syn. 'Bona')</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Brix reading</strong></td>
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<td>16</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>15</td>
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Cooked Tasting Exercise Comments.

Forum members tasted each entry after it had been cooked, both sweetened and unsweetened.

‘Big Ben’
Unsweetened – Sharp, good depth but acid, strong flavour.
Sweetened – thick juice, flavour improved with sugar good depth.

‘Ben Connan’

‘Ben Gairn’
– Good flavour and acidity, thicker consistency. Good rich blackcurrant taste.

‘Ben Sarek’
– Good blackcurrant flavour but sharp and acidic. Good consistency. This variety would need more sugar.

‘Ben Hope’
– Sharp with a strong flavour not typical of blackcurrant. Thick consistency.

‘Ben Lomond’
– Good blackcurrant flavour not too acid.

‘Ben Loyal’
– Moderately sharp flavour in raw fruit, too acid with a mild blackcurrant flavour. Thick consistency.

‘Tiben’
– Good flavour. The taste was moderately sharp with a moderate blackcurrant flavour.

‘Ben Tirran’
– Sharp with a moderate blackcurrant flavour. Fruit left an after taste.

‘Ben Finlay’ (Sdg 8872-1)
– Insipid flavour; taste rather metallic in flavour leaving an unpleasant after taste.

‘Ben Maia’ (Sdg 9476-2)
– Poor flavour, strong acidic flavour. Good blackcurrant taste.

‘Ebony’
Unsweetened – Poor flavour, lacks ‘blackcurrant flavour’, metallic and sharp.
Sweetened – Flavour better but dry. Lacks depth, still not typical ‘blackcurrant flavour’
Plants Receiving the Award of Garden Merit

The following are the plants to fulfil the Award of Garden Merit criteria during the trial and to be worthy of receiving the award. The criteria which a plant needs to fulfil in order to receive the award are:

- excellent for ordinary use in appropriate conditions
- available
- of good constitution
- essentially stable in form and colour
- reasonably resistant to pests and diseases

Hardiness ratings are as follows:
- H4 – hardy throughout the British Isles
Plants Awarded AGM

*Rubus nigrum* ‘Big Ben’ AGM 2012 (H4)  
[Trial no.1]  
Early Cultivar

**Fruit quality:** very good; large glossy berries with above average fresh eating flavour and good cooked taste.

**Yield:** good and consistent across the trial.

**Plant habit and vigour:** quite spreading bush, medium vigour.

**Ease of picking:** some care needed as berries have short strigs with a short handle.

**Pest and disease resistance:** good.

**Season:** early; even ripening.

**Comments:** Good all round cultivar. Best combination of good fresh eating and cooked quality in the trial which also gave good crops on a bush size and habit suited to gardens.

**Origin:** a complex cross involving (Goliath x Ojebyn) op, Ben Nevis and Vistavotnaja.

**Sent by** SCRI
Reconfirmed AGMs

*Ribes nigrum* 'Ben Connan' (PBR) - AGM 1995 (H4)  
Reconfirmed 2012  
[Trial no.2]

**Fruit quality**: medium to quite small fruit, attractive with good fresh and cooked flavour.

**Yield**: high and consistent.

**Plant habit and vigour**: compact bush, medium vigour.

**Ease of picking**: long strigs making for easy picking.

**Pest and disease resistance**: good.

**Season**: mid-season

**Comments**: High yields of good quality berries on a compact, medium vigour bush, which is easy to pick.

**Sent by** SCRI  
Origin: Ben Sarek x Ben Lomond.

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'Re Ben Connan' Fruits

General planting view

Flowers early April
The following existing AGMs were not reconfirmed following trial assessment and their removal from AGM status was recommended:

**Ribes nigrum ‘Ben Sarek’** [Trial no. 4]; Voted 7:0 Sent by Welsh Fruit Stocks.

**Ribes nigrum ‘Ben Lomond’**(PBR) [Trial no. 6]; Voted 7:0 Sent by SCRI.

**Trial Index and Senders Details**

### Early Cropping

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trial No</th>
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<th>Cultivar</th>
<th>Sender</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
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<td>‘Big Ben’</td>
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<td>‘Ben Gairn’</td>
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<td>‘Ebony’ (syn. ‘Bona’)</td>
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### Mid-Season Cropping

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<td>4</td>
<td>AGM ‘93</td>
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<td>‘Tiben’</td>
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### Late Cropping

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<td>‘Ben Tirran’</td>
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<td>‘Ben Maia’ (Sdg 9476-2)</td>
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Senders:

- Michael H. Keene & Son Ltd, The Moat, Newent, Gloucestershire, GL18 1JG.
- R W Walpole Ltd, Ivy Farm, Terrington St. Clement, King’s Lynn, Norfolk PE34 4PX.
- Scottish Crop Research Institute, Invergowrie, Dundee DD2 5DA.
- Welsh Fruit Stocks, Bryngwyn, via Kington, Hereford HR5 3QZ.

Fruit Trials Forum members:

Dr J Morgan (Chair); S Brice; H Baker; DW Burd; NP Dawson; ND Dunn; J O Edgeley; G M Edwards; Dr D Pennell; H Pudwell; Dr D J Quinlan; T E Read; RR Stapleton; J Arbury and M Moulton (co-opt).

Source: Horticultural Trials and Relations, RHS Garden Wisley, Woking, Surrey GU23 6QB
E-mail: trials@ rhs.org.uk

More information about RHS Trials and other colour illustrated reports can be found on the RHS Website: http://www.rhs.org.uk/trials