

Plant of the Month

Ribes montigenum – alpine prickly currant

Family: Grossulariaceae, gooseberry family

Habit: Spiny deciduous shrubs with 3-5 spines per node (point at leaf or branch emergence), 2.3-8 mm long; leaves pentagonal with 3-5 lobes, surface covered in fine glandular hairs; flowers shallow cups or saucers borne in clusters of 3-8, sepals yellowish green to pink or red, petals purplish-red, pink, red or purplish; floral base (hypanthium) covered in aromatic glandular hairs; berries bright red; new branches are light tan, smooth, becoming rough and darker with age. Flowers May – August.



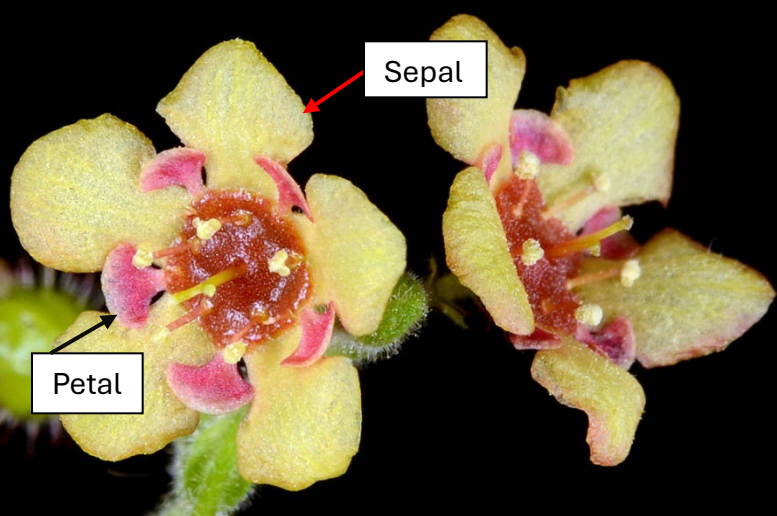
Habitat: Subalpine and alpine slopes, spruce forests. 8,500 – 13,200 feet. Can be found on BCPOS properties such as Caribou Ranch.



What appear to be petals at first glance are the sepals – an outer layer that protects the flower in the early stages of development. The true petals are small wedges tucked just inside the sepals. The hypanthium is the base of the flower, where the sepals and petals unite and encompass the ovary. When pollinated, this becomes the fruit. The glandular hairs on the hypanthium persist through the fruit's maturity, giving the berries a bristly appearance. It usually takes 3 years for a shrub to produce berries.

The species name *montigenum* is Latin for “mountain-born”. *Ribes montigenum*, or alpine prickly currant, can be found from subalpine ecosystems down to the lower elevations of the montane in dry rocky outcrops, along streams, meadows, or in the understory of wet forests. Seed dispersal is aided by birds and small mammals that eat the berries. It can also expand its area laterally through root suckering. While quite tart on its own, berries are foraged to make jam or pemmican, an Indigenous food made from a mixture of tallow (animal fat), dried meat, and berries.

Ribes montigenum could be confused with *Ribes cereum*, wax currant, or *Ribes inerme*, whitestem gooseberry; *R. cereum* is much more common across Boulder County and has smaller, round leaves and lacks prickles. *Ribes inerme* has tubular flowers and bluish-black berries.



Sources:

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Mountain gooseberry (Ribes montigenum). Botanical Realm. (2024, October 14). <https://www.botanicalrealm.com/plant-identification/mountain-gooseberry-ribes-montigenum/>

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