



Gary and Ann Thewis stand in front of the sign for Thewis Ridge Currant Co. They credit the currant crop with bringing their family closer together.

Preserving Wisconsin's heritage

Small-fruit farms proving a boon for keeping families on the land

By **CAITLIN LEITZEN**
Special correspondent

COCHRANE, Wis. — A rustic wooden sign hangs in front of 2,400 knee-high bushes, advertising the Thewis Ridge Currant Company LLC.

The sign was made by the brother of farm owners Ann and Gary Thewis from wood grown on this family farm — in business for about 100 years.

“Everything is so meaningful,” said Kate Albrecht of Brookfield, Wis., daughter of Ann and Gary. “It’s not just to make money, it’s more than that.”

Family is important to the Thewises, who planted their small black currant operation in April 2010. Each of their three daughters, grandchildren, great-nephews and others helped in the initial stages of planting, weeding



Black currant plants grow on the Thewis' farm.

and nurturing the young crop.

“This is one way to get the family to come back, which is what Gary and I really want — to find joy in the things that are grown here,” Ann said.

The Thewises already had a 70-head dairy farm, but were looking for ways

to diversify due to the strenuous work involved with cows.

“We can’t milk much longer,” said Ann. “We need another income.”

With family-owned dairy farms slowly becoming impractical in the region, locals have turned to these smaller, less labo-

rious operations to keep the family involved and the land productive.

Wisconsin’s new crop of fruit farms is a logical progression to prolong and preserve the iconic family farm.

Rebecca Harbut, fruit crop specialist and professor of horticulture at University of Wisconsin-Madison, said black currants are an ideal choice for the area.

In addition to the extensive health benefits of black currants, the crop is able to tolerate different soils, is affected by very few diseases and has few pest pressures, including insects or deer.

Black currants are a strong and bold fruit, similar to the taste of a gooseberry. At the Thewises Field Day on Aug. 21, the fruit was featured in wine,