

Cranberry Bogs

By Francie McGowan

Cranberries (*Vaccinium macrocarpon*) are one of the few truly native American fruits. They grow in wetlands where the soil is acidic, sandy and rich with peat. The bogs were originally formed by glacial deposits. Cape Cod is famous for its abundance of cranberry bogs, each autumn the berries ripen and are ready to be harvested. There are more than 14,000 cranberry bogs in southern Massachusetts.



Cranberries grow on trailing vines like strawberries.

The growing season is from April to November. Growers found that spreading an inch or two of sand every three years helps them produce more berries. Some vines on Cape Cod are over 150 years old. Contrary to popular belief, cranberries don't grow in water. We always see pictures of the bogs at harvest time with people walking in wading boots, gathering all the floating ruby fruit. The berries are very light and airy when ripe so, at harvest time, the evening before the berries are harvested, bogs are flooded, and water reels (called "eggbeaters") are used that churn the water so the berries break loose and float, making harvesting much easier.



The name cranberry came from Dutch settlers who called them crane berries because the flowers' light pink petals twist back and look like the head of a crane. The berries are very rich in antioxidants. One cup of cranberries is only fifty calories. They have historically been used in fighting urinary infections and in reducing the risk of cardiovascular diseases, though these remedies haven't been scientifically proven. Except for the sugar, cranberries are probably the healthiest item on the Thanksgiving table.

But cranberries are very sour and require lots of sugar. Sodas and fruit juices have fallen out of favor with the increasingly health-conscious consumer. For this reason, there has been a decrease in the demand for the product, so now there is an overabundance of cranberries. If the industry (the main umbrella corporation of many of the brands is Ocean Spray) skips one harvest, there would still be enough cranberries for the next season. According to an article in *Modern Farmer magazine*: "...for an individual cranberry grower to, say, decide he or she should flood a local market with surplus cranberries, there would be legal penalties by the USDA." If the growers have to reduce their production, they would possibly be required to throw out, or compost, the surplus. The industry is trying to introduce new regulations to deal with this problem.

Still, for Mother Lode gardeners who love trying new projects in the garden, it is possible to grow cranberries at home, though it may take up to two or three years before the plants bear fruit. The soil needs to have a pH less than 5 (acidic). In our area, replete with pines, the soil is ideal for growing this plant.

The plants need at least 3 months of temperatures 32F - 45F. Growing the plants from seed won't work, so it is better to mail order the plants. The beds should be layered with sand, peat, gravel and clay. Plant the seedlings after the last major frost. Plant the seedlings 2 to 3 feet apart. Water the plants daily for the first couple of weeks. Keep the soil and peat moist, but not drenched.

Mulch the plants in winter with pine needles, or organic compost. No additional fertilizer needs to be added until after 3 years. Of course, instead of flooding your bog at harvest time, you will need to pick the berries by hand.

Most of us just eat cranberries at Thanksgiving time, so we aren't getting that much sugar overall - certainly not more than the pumpkin and mincemeat pies that follow dinner! Although we won't be happy with the result of the added calories of the traditional dinner, we have a lot to be thankful for up here in the Sierra Nevada mountains. HAPPY THANKSGIVING!

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