

Cranberry Facts

One of just three native North American fruits, the cranberry was an important source of food long before the Pilgrims arrived. Native Americans, who referred to cranberries as sassamanash, made cakes prepared with lean, dried strips of meat pounded into paste and mixed with animal fat, grains and cranberries. Referred to as Pemmican, these cakes had an excellent keeping quality and were later utilized during long journeys, especially on ships crossing the Atlantic Ocean. Used to make dyes and poultices by the Pilgrims, cranberries soon became a vital source of vitamin C for whalers and a valuable resource to New England residents.

In 1816, Captain Henry Hall (a veteran of the Revolutionary War) of Dennis, Massachusetts, noticed that sand blowing gently over his bog and settling onto the cranberry vines improved their production. This simple act of nature imitated by Captain Hall and generations of cranberry growers has strengthened an industry that celebrates its bounty at harvest. Today, more than 230 acres of cranberry bogs nestled among more than a dozen Maine villages and towns are harvested each fall.

Cranberries grow wildly from the Carolinas to the maritime provinces of Canada, but prefer areas that have sandy soil, an abundant fresh water supply, and a growing season that lasts from May to November. Suited for these conditions, Hancock and Washington Counties have become home to over 85% of Maine's commercial cranberries.

Cranberry bogs utilize a unique growing system that includes wetlands, uplands, ditches, flumes, ponds and other water bodies. The entire cranberry wetland system provides diverse habitats to many rare animal and plant species including the red-bellied turtle, Plymouth gentian, slender arrowfoot, and red root. Other plant and animal species found in and around cranberry bogs include otters, beavers, muskrats, great blue herons, wood ducks, osprey, foxes, deer, bear, moose, and flowers such as water lilies, meadow beauty, and loosestrife.

In winter, bogs are covered with water that freezes and provides insulation from frost. As the winter snow melts and spring arrives, the bogs are drained and cranberry vines are awakened by gentle rains and warmer days. Soon after spring, light pink blossoms which resemble the head and neck of the sandhill crane begin to appear. [It is thought that the reason cranberries used to be called *crane*berries is most likely because of that resemblance]. As flowers bloom, honeybees and bumblebees work diligently to pollinate flowers, ensuring a good crop. In mid-July, petals fall from the flowers leaving tiny green nodes called 'pinheads' which during the remaining weeks of summer sun, gradually increase in size to become red, ripe cranberries.

Considered the lifeblood of cranberries, water is used throughout the year for irrigation, insect control (by flooding the bog at key times of the year), and to protect vines from weather damage in winter and frost damage in Spring and Fall. As Fall approaches, water is essential for growers intending to water-harvest their berries.

During harvest, many growers flood their bogs, causing cranberries—which have small air pockets in the center—to rise up in the water. Growers then use water-reel harvesting machines—sometimes called egg beaters—to break the cranberries from the vines, causing them to float to the top of the water. After floating to the top, the berries are corralled onto conveyers to waiting trucks or large wooden crates. They are then taken to receiving stations and eventually processing plants where they are used for juice, sauce, and other processed foods.

Currently, about 13 percent of the cranberries grown in Maine are dry-harvested and sold as fresh fruit. To dry-harvest, growers use either their hands, wooden rakes, or lawn mower-shaped mechanical pickers with comb-shaped conveyer belts that pick the berries and deposit them into attached burlap bags or other kinds of containers. The berries are then sold at roadside stands, farmers' markets, or are delivered to local grocery stores or fresh fruit receiving stations where they are graded and screened based on their color and ability to bounce (rotten berries don't bounce).

Cranberries are the number one food crop in Massachusetts, with more than 500 growers producing 38 percent of the nation's cranberry supply. In Maine, potatoes are the number one food crop, followed by wild blueberries. Cranberries are far down on Maine's list, but they are helping Maine farmers to diversify their farm operations. A large apple grower in Turner now has 12 acres of cranberries, which has increased the money-making potential of his operation. He is now making his own cranberry-apple juice and cranberry-apple cider drinks, for example.

Maine cranberry growers have much to celebrate at harvest time—the serene setting of cranberries being harvested, the beauty of the surrounding environment, the fruits of their long laboring year, and the pride and knowledge that they are continuing a New England tradition that is now an important part of Maine's economy.

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