



CRANBERRIES

in the classroom



Cranberry History

They Didn't Come Over on the Mayflower, They Were Already Here

Cranberries are as American as apple pie – in fact, even more so. Cranberries are one of only three fruits native to North America, in addition to Concord grapes and blueberries. Long before the Pilgrims arrived in 1620, the North American Indians combined crushed cranberries with dried deer meat and melted fat to make pemmican – a food that would keep for a long time.

They believed that the cranberry had medicinal properties. Often they would brew cranberry poultices to draw poison from arrow wounds. Native American women made their rugs and blankets colorful by dyeing them with the red cranberry juice. Later, American sailors carried barrels of cranberries on their voyages as a source of vitamin C to prevent scurvy; much like British “limeys” carried limes aboard ships.

To various Native American tribes, the berry was known by many different names. To the eastern Indians, cranberries were known as “sassamanesh.” The Cape Cod Pequots and the New Jersey Leni-Lenape tribes called the little red berry “ibimi” or bitter berry, but it was the Pilgrims who gave the cranberry its modern name. To them, the shape of the cranberry blossoms resembled the heads of cranes. The berry was therefore named “crane berry,” later contracted to “cranberry.”

Reaping the Benefits

Cranberries are a unique fruit. They can only grow and survive under a very special combination of factors: they require an acid peat soil, an adequate fresh water supply and a prolonged growing season that stretches from April to November.

Contrary to popular belief, cranberries do not grow in water. Instead, they grow on vines in beds layered with sand, peat, gravel and clay. These beds, commonly known as bogs or marshes were originally made by glacial deposits.

Normally, growers do not have to replant each year since an undamaged cranberry vine will still survive indefinitely. Some vines of Cape Cod are hundreds of years old and still bear fruit.

In addition to Massachusetts, the major growing areas for cranberries are New Jersey, Wisconsin, Washington, Oregon, as well as parts of Canada and Chile.



CRANBERRIES in the classroom



The cranberry was first harvested by hand. Sometime later, pickers used wooden scoops to comb through the vines and lift off the berries. Today, growers use two methods for harvesting: dry harvesting and wet harvesting.

In dry harvesting growers use a mechanical picker that looks like a giant lawnmower. The picker combs the berries off the vine with moving metal teeth, and then a conveyor belt carries the berries to a receptacle at the back of the machine. The fresh cranberries that are sold in the produce section of your supermarket are harvested primarily by the dry method. These cranberries are most often used for cooking and baking.

Wet harvested cranberries are used mostly for processed foods, juices, sauces and relishes. Wet harvesting actually begins the night before the harvest when the grower floods the bogs with water. The next day, water reels, nicknamed 'egg beaters,' are used to stir up the water in the bogs. The cranberries are loosened from the vine and float to the surface of the water where they are corralled and loaded onto trucks. They are delivered to a central receiving station where they undergo a thorough sorting process.

One way the quality of the cranberry is judged is whether or not it bounces. Cranberries have pockets of air inside them that make them bounce. If a cranberry is damaged or spoiled, it will not bounce. This special property of the cranberry was first noted by an early New Jersey grower, John "Peg-Leg" Webb. Because of his wooden leg, he could not carry his berries down from the loft of his barn where he sorted them. Instead, he would pour them down the steps. He soon noticed that only the firmest fruit bounced down to the bottom; the rotten and bruised berries remained on the steps. His observations lead to the development of the first cranberry bounce board separator.

Making the Environment Our Business

Cranberry production could not be sustained without the preservation of the cranberry wetlands system – a delicately balanced ecosystem that includes the actual bog and its support network of fields, forests, streams, ponds and reservoirs. This preservation could not occur without the firm commitment of cranberry growers.

By nature and necessity, growers are masters of water management and careful stewards of the environment. In the spring, some cranberry growers flood the bogs to keep away pests. In the fall, water becomes the main tool for harvest. And in winter, the growers again flood the bogs to prevent wind damage. In order to conserve this vast amount of water, growers have developed a sophisticated



CRANBERRIES

in the classroom



irrigation system. This allows them to save the water by recycling it back to reservoirs and other growers' bogs.

The practices and systems employed by cranberry growers protect and preserve valuable wetlands. These systems filter groundwater, recharge aquifers and control floods by retaining storm-water runoff. In addition, these wetlands provide refuge for many plant and wildlife species.

Cranberries: Store It All Up Inside:

- Fresh cranberries are available in stores from mid-September through December and are most abundant during their peak harvest season – October and November.
- Cranberries may be stored in the refrigerator just as you bought them, for up to two weeks.
- Before using, sort and rinse cranberries in running water.
- Buying fresh cranberries in season, then freezing them, guarantees enjoyment of these berries all year long.
- To freeze cranberries, double-wrap in plastic without washing.
- Prepping frozen cranberries for cooking is simple. Just sort and rinse cranberries in cold water. No thawing is necessary and, in fact, best results are obtained without thawing.
- Cranberries are a versatile ingredient for everything from relishes to desserts. Use your imagination and you'll discover hundreds of ways to enjoy this native American fruit.

Juicy Tidbits

- If you strung all the berries harvested last year end-to-end, they would wrap around the earth 45 times.
- There are more than 100 different varieties of cranberries, but four varieties, Early Black, Howes, McFarlins and Searles account for most of the cranberries in North America.
- Homemade cranberry sauce makes a great gift! To give each jar a decorative touch, place a small fabric square over the top of a jar and wrap a bow over the fabric around the neck of the jar.