

# Cranberries – The Indians loved them too

## A versatile fruit from America



**The cranberry – one of only a few native North American fruits – was an important staple long before the Pilgrims settled the continent.**

Native Americans, who referred to cranberries as sassamanash, used them to make cakes they called pemmican, that had excellent keeping quality and were taken on long journeys. Later, the Pilgrims used cranberries to make dyes and poultices. Cranberries soon became a vital source of vitamin C for whalers and a valuable resource for the residents of New England. Today, cranberry juices - either pure or in combination - are extremely popular in America. And what would the traditional Thanksgiving turkey be without cranberry sauce?

### **Cranberry varieties**

The name "cranberry" comes from the fact that the open flowers of the cranberry resemble the head of a crane. The cranberry is a woody,

vining, perennial, evergreen plant. Like the blueberry, it needs a good supply of nutrients and water. There are three types of cranberry: *Vaccinium macrocarpon*, the large cranberry, is the species that is grown for commercial purposes and is probably the most widespread of any of the cranberries. *Vaccinium*



*oxycoccus* is commonly called the mossberry or small cranberry and still grows in the wild in some areas. *Vaccinium vitis-idaea* is called the lingonberry or mountain cranberry. It grows well in very cold climates and is currently being developed as a crop in Poland and the former Soviet Union.

### **Cranberry vegetation**

Cranberries rely on a large network of support areas - the fields, forests, streams and ponds – that make up the cranberry wetlands system.



Massachusetts cranberry growers conserve more than 25,000 hectares of open space, of which only roughly 6,000 hectares can be used as cranberry beds.

The cranberry vine thrives on the special combination of soils and hydrology in these wetlands. Many of the bogs in southeastern Massachusetts have been in production for more than 100 years. Recently, though, new bogs are being constructed because the natural bogs are no longer level, the variety is a low producer and prone to rot, or weeds such as briars or poison ivy have overtaken the vines.

In winter, the bogs are covered with water that freezes and provides insulation from frost. As the winter snow melts and spring arrives, bringing with it warmer days and gentle rains, the bogs are drained and the cranberry vines begin to shoot. Soon after spring, light pink blossoms appear. In mid July, the petals fall from the flowers, leaving behind tiny green nodes. After weeks of summer sun, these nodes then ripen into red cranberries.

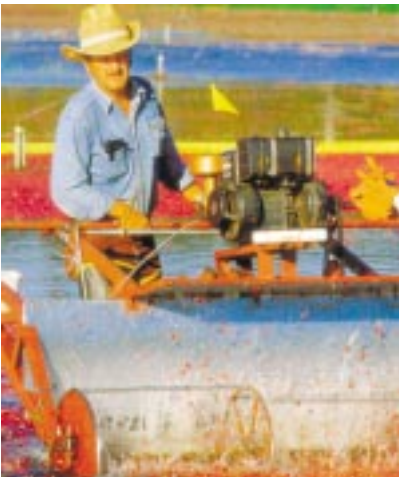
### **Cranberry growing**

Commercial production began on Cape Code in Massachusetts around 1815 and in the course of time spread to other regions as well. Today, Massachusetts is the leading state in cranberry production, followed by Wisconsin, New Jersey, Washington and Oregon. There is also considerable production in



Canada, where significant quantities are produced in Nova Scotia, Quebec and British Columbia.

Before planting a new cranberry bed, the land is leveled with laser guided equipment to provide optimum water management. This also allows greater mechanization in the cranberry bog, especially at harvest.



### **Cranberry harvest**

Cranberries are harvested once a year, from mid September through early November. There are two methods of harvesting cranberries. The "dry method" involves using walk-behind machines to rake the berries off the vine into boxes or bags.

However more than 85 percent of the crop is "wet harvested". This method involves flooding the bog and mechanically beating the berries from the vine. The cranberries float to the surface and are driven to one end of the bed by the wind or a mechanical boom system. There, they are then raked onto elevators that raise them into waiting trucks, which haul them to the processing industry.

Even though cranberries can be a very lucrative crop to grow, not everyone can raise them because of the large water demand. Even in the United States, there are fewer than 1,000 cranberry growers, around 500 of them in Massachusetts. As a result, cranberry growers have never been able to satisfy the public's demand for this fruit, which has helped to keep the prices that growers receive relatively high.