

The Amazing Cranberry

by Lyn Chimera

While reading a new book by Gail Gracie, "Summer Wildflowers of the Northeast", I discovered amazing and interesting information about everyone's favorite accompaniment to turkey dinners, the cranberry. The information below is adapted from that book.

Cranberries (*Vaccinium macrocarpon* Ait.) are native to northern North America ranging from Maine west to Minnesota, and south to N. Carolina and Tennessee. Their preferred habitat is wet bogs and swamps with a pH of 4 - 5.5.

When you think of cranberry the berry fruit is what comes to mind. However, the cranberry plant has an attractive flower which was the inspiration for its name. Early settlers thought the graceful flowers looked like a crane's curved neck, head and long bill so named it "crane-berry".

Cranberry is a member of the Heath family, Ericaceae, which also includes blueberries, huckleberries, azaleas and rhododendrons. The genus has over 500 species with 25 of those growing in North America.

Considered a trailing subshrub, its leaves are evergreen, short and elliptical with rounded ends. The fruit has internal air pockets surrounding the seed chambers which allows the berry to float. Cranberries are not grown in flooded areas. The cranberry bogs are flooded when the berries are ripe. The berries are then "raked" off the shrubs and easily harvested while floating in the water. You've probably seen pictures of this colorful harvesting method. Before this method they were hand picked which was extremely time consuming.

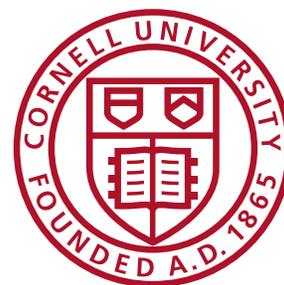
Cranberries were an important resource for Native Americans as a food source, dye, bait, and medicinal plant. The most common food use was to make pemmican, a mixture of dried cranberries, deer meat and tallow. The acidity in the cranberry and the tallow fat allowed the food to be stored dry for a long time. It was the primary food source for hunters and traders. Sailors used dried cranberries to ward off scurvy as it is high in vitamin C. Another interesting fact is they are pollinated by bumble

bees. The way the flowers are organized it takes the larger furry body of the bumble bee to properly pollinate. The colonists found their imported honeybees were not as effective and led to reduced harvests.

Wisconsin is surprisingly the top producer in the US with Massachusetts coming in second. Cranberry has become a \$300 million crop in the US due to the increased demand for it as an antioxidant, immune system booster and to prevent urinary tract infections. Dried cranberries are experiencing popularity as a healthy addition to salads, baked goods, and dried fruit/nut mixtures. What an amazing plant!



Photo of cranberry flower



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