



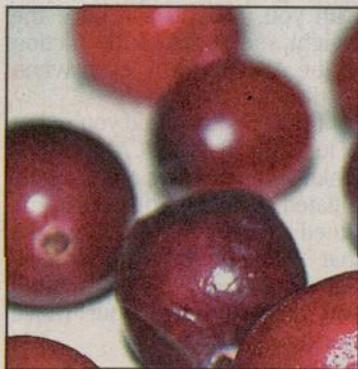
Cranberries an American fruit

By Dr. Robert Naczi

As we approach Thanksgiving, we should revise the expression "...as American as apple pie." After all, the apple's origins are in Central Asia. Cranberries (*Vaccinium macrocarpon*), on the other hand, are among the fruits native to North America that have achieved commercial success and international culinary renown. It's appropriate that the uniquely American holiday be linked with the uniquely American cranberry.

Cranberries are native to a large region — from Minnesota, east to Newfoundland, and south to North Carolina. They grow in damp to wet places that are quite acidic and poor in most plant nutrients, such as nitrogen and phosphorous. Bogs are one example of wild cranberry habitat.

In Delaware, cranberries are uncommon, and most wild populations are small. The predominant habitat in Delaware is a low, wet depression among sand dunes along the Atlantic Ocean. Cape Henlopen State Park hosts several populations.



As a crop, cranberries are grown in pre-existing bogs or in shallow depressions dug in the landscape to simulate bogs. In most commercial cranberry bogs, a bank is built around the bog to allow the temporary impoundment of water. When cranberries are ripe, bogs are flooded to a shallow depth to facilitate harvest. Because ripe cranberries float, they are easily separated from their vine-like stems by beating, and then the floating fruits are gathered. Though more labor-intensive, "dry" harvest is important, too. Dry-harvested berries tend to keep longer than those that have been in water.

The majority of cranberries

are grown in Wisconsin, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Oregon, and Washington, in decreasing order. Oregon and Washington are major success stories for cranberries because the fruit is not native there, and was intentionally introduced as a crop.

Relatively few fruits native to North America have become economically important. Cranberries are close relatives of another successful fruit crop, blueberries. By weight, cranberry production in the U.S. is more than double that of blueberries, though. When we eat cranberry sauce, relish, or stuffing on Thanksgiving, let's give thanks for native fruits such as cranberries.

Editor's note: Dr. Robert Naczi is curator of the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium on the campus of Delaware State University. The herbarium is Delaware's center for research, education, and outreach about plant identifications, locations, and uses. Call 857-6452 (Dr. Susan Yost) to arrange a tour of the herbarium, and call 857-6450 (Dr. Robert Naczi) for more information about this article.