

One of the jobs that I was always given when I helped with Thanksgiving growing up with the cranberry sauce. I always thought it was interesting that the canned jelly always came out in one solid piece, and I love cranberry juice, but I don't think I saw an actual cranberry until I was in college. They're an odd looking berry, with their glossy red exterior and oblong shape. There's a lot more to them than meets the eye though.

Cranberries are native to the United States, and were originally called craneberries after their flowers, which resemble a crane's head. They are used commonly for Thanksgiving and Christmas, likely because they are harvested in September and October and dry well for storage. Surprisingly, Wisconsin produces the most cranberries in the United States. Over fifty percent of the cranberries that are grown in the United States are grown in Wisconsin. Botanically speaking, they are in the Ericaceae family, meaning they are the same family as blueberries, and that they grow better in acidic soils. They are more commonly grown in areas with high water tables, making it easier to flood the field for harvest. I always thought that they grew on a shrub-like plant, but it turns out that it looks closer to an upright vining plant like a strawberry. The cranberries themselves are actually bigger than the plants leaves. If you've never eaten a raw cranberry, they are bitter and sour, because they have a very low sugar content. The texture was also surprising to me in that they are crisp kind of like an apple. They also have four separate sections inside that are hollow, which is why fresh cranberries will bounce. The hollow space also assists in the harvest process, but I'll get to that in a minute.

Contrary to popular belief, cranberries are actually not grown in a flooded bog. The bogs are only flooded while the cranberries are being harvested. Once the cranberries are ready to harvest, the field is flooded, and then went through with a machine that kind of looks like it has a roll of fence wire on it that spins that shakes all of the vines and shakes the cranberries. Because they have the four air chambers inside them, they are buoyant and rise to the top of the water. The cranberries are then corralled to a central area and put onto a truck for cleaning and transport. Fun fact, most bogs are occupied by spiders that control the insect population, so when the bogs are flooded, the spiders walk across the cranberries to stay above the water. They can also be harvested dry, but it depends on what they're going to be used for. Cranberries that are harvested dry are used and sold fresh. The ones that are harvested by flooding the bog are used for processing to make juice, sauce, and other items.

No matter what form cranberries are in, they have some proven health benefits. They are high in antioxidants and considered a superfood. The classic red color is a result of anthocyanins, an antioxidant that is also present in grapes, eggplant, blueberries, and many others. They can boost immune systems, promote heart health, and prevent certain kinds of infections.

Cranberries may be odd, but they have a long history in the United States. They grow well in acidic soils, but are not grown in flooded bogs. The bogs are flooded later to help with harvest, but only if those cranberries are going to be processed. They also have some amazing health benefits. They may not be my favorite berry, but I'll keep drinking cranberry juice and putting dried cranberries in my fruitcake for Christmas. Have a great Thanksgiving everyone!

If you have any questions or would like to suggest a topic for me to write about, feel free to contact me at the Buffalo County Extension Office, at 308-236-1235, or mearnest2@unl.edu.