

The Sauce on Cranberries

by Susie Spikol, Community Programs Director

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Laurel and Alden Brown harvesting wild cranberries in a top-secret location. photo © Phil Brown

Growing up, I never knew that cranberries were a real thing. My only experience was when a jiggling red jelly log, complete with stripes from the can, made its way around our Thanksgiving table. I never ate it because it reminded me of Jello – something I only ate when I was sick.

My first encounter with real cranberries came one late autumn day while wandering along a bog in my early 20s. Bogs and swamps are secretive places that don't give up their treasures easily. Brushy undergrowth, mucky edges and sloppy hummocks make exploring them an adventure. But for those who are hardy, curious and own a good pair of waterproof boots, swamp-walking delivers. From squashy sphagnum moss and stunning pink laurel blooms to the sticky funnels of the insect-eating pitcher plants, our New Hampshire wetlands are full of surprises.

That day so many years ago, while standing on the mossy mats, I noticed a bright red dot of color in the dark green vegetation. Investigating further, I found a firm, cheery berry dangling like a jewel from a small trailing plant with glossy leaves. My fellow swamp-walkers bent down and popped the berries in their mouths, cheering, “Cranberries!”

I was stunned. Cranberries were real! Who knew? Bearberries, another name for this plant, are members of the heath family, which include such stars as blueberries and huckleberries. Many members of this family prefer the acidic soils of bogs and swamps.

About Cranberries

Large, small, and mountain cranberries are the three types found in New England wetlands.

Cranberries are lowriders, growing close to the ground with trailing, woody vines reaching up to 6 feet in length. Forming dense mats, these woody perennials send upright shoots with flower buds at the tips in May and June. Pale, pink, bell-like flowers bloom through June and July and depend on insects for pollination. By September, their distinctive fruit forms, first white and then ripening to its ruby color by October.

As a food source for wildlife, cranberries are occasionally eaten by mammals, including bears, chipmunks and mice, and a handful of birds, such as bluejays and ruffed grouse. For pollinators, however, the blooming tube-shaped flower provides an essential source of nectar and pollen.

Bumblebees, sweat bees, mining bees and bog copper butterflies are critical pollinators of wild cranberries in New Hampshire.

Perhaps these berries aren’t eaten by more mammals due to their acidic taste. The first bite of a wild cranberry is a wakeup call for your taste buds – sour, tangy, and almost peaty. Its firm fruit makes a satisfying pop when you bite it. After my first encounter with this native wetland fruit, I fell in love, and there is so much to love about this native wetland plant.

For Sherry Gould, an enrolled member of the Nulhegan Band of Coosuk Abenaki Nation and a lifelong resident of New Hampshire, cranberries are much more than just a side dish. For her, they are a link to her past – where she learned all about them from her mother while ankle-deep in the bogs. The fall harvest of these bright berries is not only a link to the memories of her mother but also a deep connection to the traditions of the Abenaki Nation passed down through generations.

Popokwa, the Abenaki word for cranberries, would have been an important staple. As a late fruit, bright with flavor, these berries were easy to store, needing minimal processing. Popokwaôbo, cranberry sauce, would have been served often, and the berries would have been used regularly in a

traditional paste made from dried meats, such as deer or moose, fruits, nuts and seeds. This mixture would then be mixed with animal fat and pounded into a protein-packed bar, much like the granola and protein bars we eat now. These traditional power bars were highly portable and lasted during long journeys and hard winters. According to Sherry, cranberries would have also been recognized for their medicinal properties, such as being an important source of vitamin C and fiber and as an antioxidant and astringent.

Sherry describes that picking the berries is an autumnal reminder: “It is the time of year to let things go, so any hold of pain from the previous year gets released when I pick cranberries, which is at the same time of year the trees let go of their leaves. Cranberries are known to cleanse things like plaque or the kidneys. It's like they help us not let things stick.”

This holiday season, when you sit down to eat your feast, and the bowl of cranberry sauce comes your way, don't forget to share a moment of gratitude for this hardy, original and traditional fruit from the land. And consider ways that you can help protect the bogs, swamps and wetlands where such treasures grow. 🐾



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