

# Wisconsin's Cranstastic Fruit

## • CRANBERRIES FROM BOG TO BAG •



Around 1860, Edward Sackett arrived in the Berlin, Wisconsin, area from New York to take a look at some land he had bought sight unseen. What he saw was 700 acres of what was called "shaking bog" filled with wild cranberry vines. The first thing he probably did was swear a lot. Then he recalled that cranberries were a cash crop back east and decided he would start cultivating them here. He built a warehouse, a dam, and dug ditches to flood the bogs when necessary for harvest or to guard against early frost. And just like that, Wisconsin's cranberry industry was born.

Wisconsin is now the world's largest grower of cranberries. The state is responsible for around 55%



of U.S. production and out-produces second place Massachusetts by more than two to one. The 250 or so Wisconsin growers harvest 18 thousand acres in 20 counties and crank out about 360 million pounds of cranberries in a year.

### **Cranberries a Good-for-you Treat**

Cranberries are well known for their antioxidant qualities and for their ability to treat and prevent urinary tract infections. A study in 1998 at Tel Aviv University indicated that the same properties that prevent urinary tract infections could also minimize the development of dental plaque. A University of Western Ontario study suggests that cranberries could have significant

cancer-fighting properties, and an ongoing study at the University of Wisconsin is showing that a glass of cranberry juice a day could significantly reduce the risk of heart disease. Not bad for a tasty, little red berry.

are cranberry syrup, mustard, drinks, jellies and jams, honey, salad dressings and grilling sauces, infused vinegars, a big selection of cranberry glass, dried cranberries, both plain and chocolate covered, and a line of cranberry-based health and beauty products (the Dr. Jonathan's



*The Exhibit Hall in the Cranberry Discovery Center shows the evolution of one of Wisconsin's top agricultural industries from hand rakes and bog shoes worn by horses to state-of-the-art high-volume machines.*

## Cranberry Discovery Center

Where can you find out more about cranberries, you may ask. Located in a 100-year-old cranberry warehouse on Main Street in downtown Warrens, Wisconsin, the Cranberry Discovery Center is everything you could want—if everything you want is cranberries. The lower floor is an exhibit hall housing a huge display of cranberry equipment and artifacts. It tells the story of cranberry production past and present. There are lots of hands-on displays and audio/video presentations. It's interesting but upstairs is where the real fun begins, because upstairs is the gift shop.

## Cranberries in Every Form

Manned by a friendly and knowledgeable staff, the store is packed from one end to the other with cranberry products and cranberry-related items. Manager Lisa Strange ran down a partial list of what you can get. "Our products are mostly from Wisconsin," Lisa explained, "Our wines are all from Wisconsin and made with berries from around here. We have a huge variety of other cranberry products, including lip balms, shampoos, muffin and pancake mixes, and cranberry jelly beans." Also available

Cran Magic Formula Lotion is a personal favorite). Co-Manager Lori Erickson was quick to point out that some pretty unusual things were in the mix as well. "How about doggie treats and dental floss? By the way, you can pick up the products in our store or order from us online."

## Cranberry Fest

Not enough cranberry lore and merchandise for you? On the last weekend in September, Warrens (population 280) sees over 100,000 visitors for the Warrens Cranberry Festival, the largest cranberry

celebration in the world. This was their 35th year. During the weekend you can take in even more cran-mania, including bog tours and sales of bulk berries (which is great if you can your own cranberry sauce or jam, like I do). Other festival events include a huge arts and crafts show, an antique/flea market, a parade, and much more. The cranberry cream puffs are not to be missed.

Cranberries are available in season at your local grocery store, but buying them in 12- or 16-ounce bags is expensive if you're planning to can lots of them. Fortunately, many of the growers sell direct from their warehouses, or allow you to order online or by mail-order. Wetherby Cranberry Company is one who does all three.

## Cranberry Family

Wetherby Cranberry Company is a family-owned company founded in 1903. Nodji Van Wychen and her husband, James, own Wetherby. They are proud of the fact that they are the only family-owned, independent packer of fresh cranberries. "For the fresh fruit portion of our crop (about one-third), we do all the marketing ourselves," Nodji explained. "We sell direct to people from



*Wetherby Cranberry Company is now producing a delicious wine from cranberries grown right in their own bogs.*



*The Cranberry Discovery Center offers a mind-boggling array of Wisconsin-made cranberry products, including cranberry wild rice blend from Rice River Farms and cranberry orange dip mix from Country Home Creations.*

the warehouse, and at farmers' markets, as well as to a variety of wholesalers. Our berries are available in one-pound bags or 5-, 10-, or 30-pound boxes"

Nodji went on to talk about Wetherby's annual Harvest Day, "The first Saturday in October from 9 A.M. to noon, we host a Harvest Day—no reservations needed and no admission charge. Our family members show the public how we harvest and how we sort and package the fresh fruit."

A list of other places to buy fresh cranberries online can be found in the Wisconsin State Cranberry Growers Association website ([www.wiscran.org](http://www.wiscran.org)). The WSCGA website is a great resource for cranberry information of all sorts.

Cranberries, as food, have been around a long time. Native Americans would mash them and mix them with deer meat to make pemmican. Legend has it that cranberries were served at the first Thanksgiving in 1621. The earliest recipes using cranberries date back to the early 18th century. Today they're used in over 800 products. Our love affair with this tart little berry shows no sign of slowing down. If nothing else, Thanksgiving just wouldn't be Thanksgiving without them.



**TOUR THE BOG** During the harvest, tours allow you to get close to the bogs and see how the equipment really works. It's possible to see the method used for fresh berries, as well as the different harvesting methods used for berries to be processed into juice, sauce, and other products.

## CRANBERRY FACTS

- The cranberry is one of only three fruits native to North America. The other two are blueberries and Concord grapes.
- Twenty percent of all cranberries grown are eaten at Thanksgiving.
- There are about 450 cranberries in a pound, 4,500 cranberries in a gallon of juice, and 45,000 in a 100-pound barrel.
- If you placed all the cranberries produced in Wisconsin in one year end-to-end, they would stretch more than one million miles.
- Cranberries were named the official Wisconsin state fruit on April 5, 2004.
- Contrary to popular belief, cranberries do not grow in water, they grow in rich, sandy soil. The bogs are flooded to facilitate harvesting because cranberries float. This makes it easy to separate them from their bushes.
- It can take up to five years for a new bog to produce cranberries but after that it will continue to produce for several decades. Some bogs have been producing for more than 100 years.
- Fresh cranberries bounce, so growers use "bounce boards" to separate good berries from bad.

## • IF YOU GO •

Cranberry Discovery Center  
204 Main Street  
Warrens, WI 54666  
(608) 378-4878  
[www.discovercranberries.com](http://www.discovercranberries.com)

Warrens Cranberry Festival  
(608) 378-4200  
[www.cranfest.com](http://www.cranfest.com)

Wetherby Cranberry Company  
3365 Auger Road  
Warrens, WI 54666  
(608) 378-4813  
[www.freshcranberries.com](http://www.freshcranberries.com)

Wisconsin State Cranberry Growers Association  
PO Box 365  
Wisconsin Rapids, WI 54495-0365  
(715) 423-2070  
[www.wiscran.org](http://www.wiscran.org)