Cranberries 'r us

by Laura Rodley

Cranberries are the number one food crop in Massachusetts.

"Wisconsin is the number one producer in the world. Massachusetts is number one in the States, and second in the country, and Quebec is in between," said Karen Cahill, deputy executive director of the Cape Cod Cranberry Growers' Association (CCCGA). Her voice for cranberries has been honed by being involved in the cranberry industry for a decade.

CCCGA represents more than 200 cranberry farms that produce 95% of all the cranberries in Massachusetts. The industry contributes more than 6,400 jobs and $1.7 billion to the state's economy. "That is according to a 2023 economic impact study conducted by Farm Credit East, which takes into account the economic multiplier impact of off-the-farm jobs associated with the industry," explained Cahill.

The cranberries are mostly distributed by what they call handlers. According to Cahill, Ocean Spray handles the majority of the industry. "Other local handlers include Decas Cranberry/Fruit d'Or, Graceland Fruit, Grayston Limited (LLC), Lassonde Pappas, Mariani and Refresco Beverages."

Then there are those who grow and handle their own fruit, retailing it themselves, like Willows Cranberries, Fresh Meadows and Cape Cod Select, a Carver, MA, grower, that sells mostly frozen berries but offers some unfrozen.

While most growers grow commercially and deliver to a commercial handler, there are some with roadside stands or stores that sell their own, like Annie's Crannies in Dennis, MA, owned by CCCGA member Annie Walker, 12th generation Cape Codder and third generation farmer. Drawn by the land and the call to produce cranberries, Walker left a thriving career as a Broadway production wardrobe supervisor in 1994 to acquire the bog where her grandfather Benjamin Walker had grown cranberries. In 1996, she replanted the bog with 'Howes' variety vines and handpicked the first crop that was sold in her new farmstand.

"There are 14 generations living on Cape Cod. I am the third generation working the bog. All my nieces and nephews and their kids help me out," said Walker, referring to Bryn, Molly and Ben Walker, Benjamin Walker's great-grandchildren. "My grand-nephews Jacob and Owen help too," making five total generations working the bog. Her store opened Columbus Day weekend.

"There are 168 original varieties and nine new cultivated ones. I planted 'Howes,' an heirloom variety that lasts through Christmas," said Walker. It was also native to the area.

"It can be picked wet or dry, and is rot resistant," she said. "Some varieties are being made to ripen earlier, making them redder and bigger so they can be harvested earlier." 'Howes' ripens later than others and needs to be picked off the vine before too many frosts.

"The drought we've been in affects them; heat affects them. It could affect their weight, because they are mostly water. Or they can get scale, or burned, and then the berry rots," said Walker.

Her bog was originally cultivated by Henry Hall in 1816. Benjamin Walker started his cranberries in 1911. He was documented to be the fastest picker in his day, using a handrocker scoop.

According to Cahill, all cranberries used to be handpicked. "They used a wooden scoop with tines that was run through the vines. Now they walk behind Furford Pickers, a machine almost like a lawnmower, putting cranberries in burlap bags." That method, called dry-picking, harvests fruit that will be sold fresh.

The wet-picking method where bogs are flooded and then the fruit is harvested, seen all along Route 6A in Sandwich, MA, and elsewhere in early September through early November, produces cranberries "used for juice, anything processed, cranberry sauce. It is entirely more efficient, but the fruit can get bruised and get wet. You can't sell wet fruit. It would rot in the store," said Cahill. These cranberries are also sold frozen.

Cranberry growers farm about 11,500 acres of land in Massachusetts. Most of the land is in Chapter 61A, and some people obtain conservation easements to further protect the land.

"There are 60,000 acres of protected land. Every acre of bog requires three to five acres of support land," Cahill said, to maintain a healthy bog.

"There are bogs that are more than 100 years old, and the vines will keep producing. But a lot of farmers are renovating, reinvesting in their farms and making them more efficient" in response to the healthy cranberry industry. "A small number are restoring their bogs, making them back into wetlands, exiting the industry," added Cahill.

Cranberry interest sparked bog tours such as those offered by capecodcranberrybogtours.com, owned by CCCGA member Dave Ross. A first-generation grower, Ross has farmed for 43 years and maintains 70 acres, primarily in East Sandwich and West Barnstable, assisted by his son James.

"I started this when I was 25," said Ross. He has been giving tours yearround for 10 to 12 years.

There are 44 towns that have bogs in them in Massachusetts, Cahill said. That's a lot of cranberries ripe for the picking. CCCGA growers include Steve Ward, Environmental & Government Affairs Committee chair, with land in Middleboro and Carver, and Bill and Louise Scott of Glen Charlie Cranberries in Wareham. According to cranberries.org, the Scotts hold one of the earliest Ocean Spray Cranberry stock certificates.



(L - R) Annie Walker and Miss Lucy the picking machine, with Ben Walker and Molly Walker (great-grandchildren of Ben Walker) during cranberry harvest at Annie's Crannies in Dennis, MA.

Photo courtesy of Annie Walker