



WINTER | 2016

# Coastal Grower

*Happy Holidays*



Cranberries grow on low-lying vines in beds layered with sand, peat, gravel and clay.

# Where Do Our Holiday Cranberries Come From?

One of the few berries imported into California, cranberries are grown with familiar precision

BY BRIAN MILNE

**H**ere in California, we're fortunate to have hundreds of types of fresh fruit, nuts and vegetables at our fingertips.

In fact, as you drive down the highway for your holiday travels, try to count just how many different crops you pass on a given trip. In the central portion of the state, traveling through the Salad Bowl, wine country and the Central Valley, speeding past dozens of varieties en route to the parents' house is a common occurrence.

In California, we now grow more than 400 commodities, according to the California Department of Food and Agriculture, which amounts to a third of the country's vegetables and two-thirds of its fruit and nuts.

In Monterey County alone, we grow more than 150 crops, according to the Monterey County Farm Bureau, including 61 percent of the country's leaf lettuce, 57 percent of

its celery, 56 percent of its head lettuce, 48 percent of its broccoli, 38 percent of its spinach, 30 percent of its cauliflower and 28 percent of its strawberries.

But one holiday favorite you likely won't see growing roadside en route to your family's traditional holiday dinner? Cranberries.

That's right, one of the season's most popular side dishes, cranberries are one of the few berries that have to be imported into California – despite being a close cousin of blueberries, which can be found growing throughout the state.

Part of the fabric of holiday celebrations across the country, cranberries are one of three mature fruits that are native to North America (along with blueberries and Concord grapes).

Cranberries, however, are an extremely water dependent berry, so they're usually found in areas with plenty of water, such as

British Columbia and Quebec, Canada, and in Wisconsin, the Pacific Northwest, and Northeastern U.S.

But contrary to popular belief, thanks in part to comedic juice commercials with farmers standing waist deep in the middle of berry-covered marshes, cranberries are not grown in standing water.

In fact, cranberries, like many berries in California, don't do well in overly wet conditions, and today's cranberry growers are implementing many of the same precision irrigation techniques we use right here in California to help boost yield, improve crop health and cut back water, energy and fertilizer use.

Today, cranberry growers have drastically slashed water use by using smart soil tension sensors in the field, as well as weather data (for frost protection) and automated irrigation systems that help keep cranberry vines in their optimal growing state.

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One U.S. Department of Agriculture study reported automated irrigation management systems can help cut back run times by two hours, which amounts to almost 300,000 gallons per acre over the length of the growing season.

Many large cranberry operations also laser level beds and implement tailwater recovery systems and dikes to maximize water efficiency. So while it might feel like cranberries are grown in a land far, far away, using foreign irrigation management practices, there are a number of similarities in growing practices like other berries grown in California. Commercially grown cranberries are irrigated regularly during warmer months, and for frost protection in the cold.

Until the fall harvest season, of course.

That's where growers in waders, collecting their floating bounty of crimson berries in flooded marshes, become a reality.

A wetland fruit, cranberries grow on trailing vines low to the ground in a similar fashion to our California strawberries. But unlike strawberries, cranberries have a longer season and are typically grown from April to November in beds layered with sand, peat, gravel and clay.

Each bed, also known as a bog or marsh, is situated near wetlands or ponds with an adequate fresh water supply, and irrigated via traditional sprinklers you'll see back home on our own fields. Flooding of the beds only occurs for harvest purposes and protection in the fall and winter.

Starting in September, when cranberries ripen and take on their distinctive red coloring, the beds are flooded with six to eight inches of water above the vines. Harvesters are used to knock the fruit from the vines, and



Cranberries being harvested earlier this year in Wisconsin.

the hollow, floating berries are corralled into a corner of the bed and conveyed and pumped into trucks. The cranberries are then trucked to receiving stations where they are cleaned, sorted and stored.

From there, cranberries are packaged or processed for our holiday meals, not unlike the other berries we grow and enjoy here in water-strapped California.

It's an interesting process when you see it firsthand, and that commitment to precision irrigation and growing more cranberries with less water and energy is definitely a sustainable growing model we can all appreciate and be thankful for this holiday season.

Learn more about Hortau precision irrigation management services at [hortau.com](http://hortau.com). **ce**



Cranberry beds are flooded in the fall and the berries corralled into a corner of the marsh for harvest.