



Trowel Talk!

December, 2012

Holiday fruits have a colourful past

When you say "please pass the cranberries", you are referring to the fruits of *Vaccinium macrocarpon*, a true native North American plant. They are in the same family as heathers and rhododendrons and are closely related to blueberries. They are not, however, related to the red berries on the shrub known as the highbush cranberry (*Viburnum trilobum*) which are not really cranberries at all. We leave those red berries for the birds!

True cranberries grow in the wild in northern temperate regions – wherever there is sandy, acidic soil, such as swampy areas and peat bogs. First Nations used the "atoka", as they called them, mixed in with other foods like pemmican, as a preservative and recognized and valued their healing properties.

Early settlers quickly learned that cranberries protected them from scurvy. Originally they named the plant 'craneberry' because someone thought its nodding flowers with recurved petals and prominent stamens looked like a crane's head.

Until the early 1800's when the first cranberry farm was started, this important staple was only available in the wild. All varieties grown commercially today were

developed from these native species.



Cranberries on the plant, ready for harvest



The cranberry bog before flooding



A mechanized beater is used to remove the cranberries from the plant. The wind helps to push the fruit to one corner of the bog making the berries easier to gather

The cranberry is a low-growing semi-evergreen woody perennial with a vining habit – it sprawls over the ground, sending out long runners which root where they touch the soil. Shorter stems grow upright from the runners, bear clusters of flowers in early summer, and bright red berries in fall. Cranberries grow naturally in wetland areas, but do not grow under water. During the summer, they need good drainage for proper growth of their shallow roots. The stems and small glossy leaves are, however, tender. As winter approaches and the

wetlands flood, the plants become submerged in water. When the water freezes, the plants go dormant and are protected from winter damage. This protection is important since it takes four to five years for a plant to mature and produce a full crop of berries.

In commercial operations, the plants are grown in raised beds, surrounded by dikes. At harvest time, usually in October, berries destined to be sold whole, fresh or frozen, are harvested dry. The beds are then flooded and the vines shaken mechanically to loosen the remaining berries. They float up and are gathered using wide rakes. These berries will be processed into juices and sauces. In areas with a cold winter, the beds are flooded again later to give the plants winter protection.

Cranberries are juicy but very acidic so they usually need sweetening, either with sugar or by combining them with other naturally sweet fruits. If they are harvested early, when still white, they are milder and need less sugar to produce the familiar tart and tangy taste.

In recent years, nutritionists have been extolling healthful benefits of the cranberry as a rich source of polyphenols, in addition to its high vitamin C and fibre content. There is a great variety of cranberry products available: sauces, jellies, juices and sweetened dried berries.

Every year at this time, I buy fresh cranberries to make sauce for our Christmas turkey, perpetuating a tradition as old as this country.

Kelly Noel
Master Gardener

Photos were taken with permission at Upper Canada Cranberries near Greely, Ontario

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December TO DO List

- Check any stored tubers/corms/bulbs to make sure they are not too dry or too moist. Drying out completely could diminish their viability. Too much moisture and they may rot.
- Decrease the watering and feeding of houseplants as they will experience dormancy due to the reduced amount of light at this time of year.
- If you have a gardening or plant identification question, ask a Master Gardener (contact information to the right).

Tip of the Month:

With gift giving season upon us, we thought it would be fun to share some ideas of must-have garden items. So if you've got to buy a gift for a gardener or if you want to drop a not-so-subtle hint such as circling items in this article, here are some suggestions:

Rain barrels are not sexy or romantic, but they are so very useful. A supply of rain water for watering containers and vegetable plots, is especially handy in dry summers like the one we just experienced.



A stainless steel transplanter spade is an essential for every garden. The spade is long and narrow so it is perfect for working in small spaces and digging deep down to the tips of roots. It stays sharp and is easy to clean.

Master Gardeners of Ottawa-Carleton



Where to find us this month for free gardening advice!

ONGOING:

Telephone Help Line: 613-236-0034

- Wednesday and Thursday 1-3 pm (all year)

E-mail Help Line: mgoc_helpline@yahoo.ca

- monitored daily
- send photos of garden pests, diseases or plants for ID

CLINICS:

No clinics until Spring 2013.

SPEAKING EVENTS & WORKSHOPS:

The Gardens of Cuba – January 22, 2013 – 7:30 p.m.

Mary Ann Van Berlo, Master Gardener

Tom Brown Arena, 141 Bayview Avenue, Ottawa, Ontario

Hosted by the Ottawa Horticultural Society (guests welcome)



For information on arranging a lecture for your group: speakers@mgottawa.mgoi.ca

For more information on Master Gardeners, visit us at: <http://mgottawa.mgoi.ca>



A sonic mole chaser sounds high tech but it is a simple little tube-shaped device that emits a pulse, which vibrates through the soil and chases moles away. It is powered with four "D" size batteries and can deter moles from an area up to ½ acre.



The Haws watering can is the gold standard of watering cans. Whether of plastic or metal, their long reach and upturned rose (that produces a gentle rainfall like flow) are what sets them apart from run-of-the-mill watering cans.



COMING SOON!

Do you feel your landscape lacks appeal or perhaps doesn't flow well? Then consider attending our Garden Design Workshop coming in April 2013. We will feature a full day of hands-on garden design. Watch future issues for more details.