Commodity Highlight

Cranberries: Not Just For the Holidays Anymore

The American cranberry (*Vaccinium macrocarpon*) is one of only three North American native fruits that are commercially grown in the United States. Historically, cranberries were used by Native Americans as a food, fabric dye, and medicine for a variety of illnesses, including bladder infections.

Today, cranberries continue to offer several important health benefits. Besides helping to maintain urinary tract health, recent research has also indicated cranberries to be an excellent source of antioxidants that protect against cancer, heart disease, and other diseases. Besides being highly nutritious, the versatility of cranberries in many food and beverage recipes aid in their popularity among American consumers.

Most of today's cranberries grow on manmade wetlands (or bogs) which are individual dryland beds layered mostly of sand and peat soil. Vine cuttings from already established beds are used for new propagation. The vines are irrigated and fertilized during the growing season which starts around May and lasts throughout the summer.

The harvest season for American cranberries runs from around mid-September until the end of October. A portion of the fresh-market berries is exported to Canada for the Canadian Thanksgiving holiday celebrated in early October. The remainder of the fresh-market berries are stored until they are ready to be packed and marketed for the U.S. holiday market.

Done mechanically, harvesting is accomplished using two methods—wet and dry. Cranberries for processing are wet harvested, while those for the fresh market are dry harvested. Following the harvest season, growers usually flood the beds during the winter when the vines turn dormant. Water in the beds freezes and protects the vines from frost or severe freezes.

Adapted to specific growing conditions, cranberry production is limited to mostly the northern portion of the United States. According to data from the National Agricultural Statistics Service, including the most recent Census of Agriculture, providing 1997 data, Wisconsin is the largest producer, with nearly half of U.S. production. On average, Wisconsin harvests 39 percent of the acreage, but it is home to only 20 percent of the farms growing cranberries. Wisconsin's share of cranberry acreage is up only slightly from 1992.

Massachusetts is the second-largest producer of cranberries, with over one-third of total production. Massachusetts' acreage is fractionally smaller than Wisconsin's but it houses 51 percent of the farms. New Jersey, Oregon, and Washington complete the top five producing States, with another 22 percent of U.S. acreage. Maine and Michigan are also minor producing States reported in the Census of Agriculture. During 1997, each of these two States only harvested 0.1 percent of U.S. acreage.

Traditionally, cranberries were eaten only with holiday turkeys. Nowadays, cranberries are consumed year round as products come in many forms—frozen berries, sauce, juice and juice blends, and dried fruit. Approximately 94 percent of the 573.9 million pounds of cranberries used domestically moved into the processing sector (mostly for juice and juice blends) during 1998 to 2000.

U.S. cranberries were produced on 1,059 farms (1997 data). The farm value of U.S. cranberries was $106.8 million in 2000.

During the mid-1990s, heightened awareness of the many health benefits offered by this American berry boosted U.S. demand for cranberry products, particularly for juice and juice blend products. U.S. cranberry juice consumption during the mid- to-late 1990's increased 26 percent from earlier in the decade, to an average of 0.20 gallon per person.

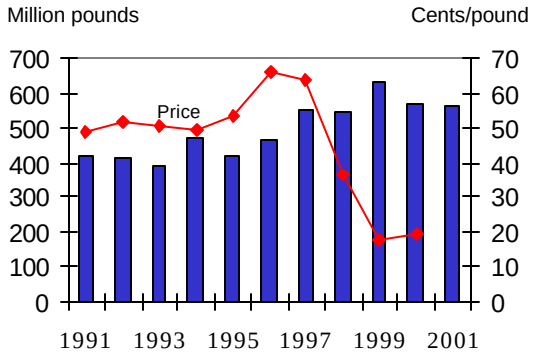
U.S. cranberry production has increased rapidly in response to the growth in consumption. With its first successful cultivation dating back to 1816, today over 36,000 acres of cranberry bogs are being harvested each year in the United States. Production reached a record high of 632 million pounds in 1999, up from 339.3 million pounds in 1990.

Over the last few years, however, U.S. cranberry production has exceeded market demand, causing inventories to accumulate and grower prices to fall sharply. In efforts to battle the glut situation, this is the second consecutive year that the volume control authorized by the Federal marketing order was used by USDA to restrict the amount of cranberries (excluding fresh-market and organically-grown berries) that can be delivered to packers during the current marketing season. The 2001 U.S. cranberry crop is forecast at 558 million pounds, down 1 percent from 2000 and down 12 percent from the record crop of 2 years ago.

Trade plays a minor role in the U.S. cranberry industry. Although small relative to total supply, the U.S. remains a net importer of cranberries, with Canada as its major supplier. A majority of the imports come in fresh form but most of these fresh berries end up for processing.

Figure 6

U.S. cranberry production and season-average grower price, 1990-2001



Source: National Agricultural Statistics Service, USDA.

Table 15--Cranberries: Acreage, production, and value, 2000

State	Acres harvested	Yield	Production	Season-avg. price	Crop value
	Acres	Barrels 1/	1,000 barrels	$/barrel	$ 1,000
Massachusetts	13,900	140.3	1,950	19.90	38,805
New Jersey	3,700	132.2	489	19.90	9,333
Oregon	2,400	152.1	365	18.90	5,765
Washington	1,500	120.0	180	25.20	4,151
Wisconsin	15,100	176.0	2,658	19.00	48,773
United States	36,600	154.2	5,642	19.60	106,827

1/ 1 Barrel=100 pounds.

Source: National Agricultural Statistics Service, USDA.