BERRY HARVEST TIME — Mechanical pickers harvest most of the cranberries in Massachusetts, but handscoops are still used to gather berries beside the ditches.
Today's Cranberries Much Like Our Forefathers Ate

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The cranberries you eat this Thanksgiving and Christmas were probably grown within a few miles of the bogs and marshes which produced the wild berries enjoyed by Indians long before our early American ancestors reached these shores.

They may even be the same variety of bouncy berry that graced the first Thanksgiving tables almost 350 years ago. Some berries available today are grown on plants started a hundred years ago.

The berries were probably harvested, however, by machines developed in the last 10 or 20 years; protected from insects and fungi by the latest chemicals, and saved from frost damage by a new water sprinkler technique.

The tangy berry is appearing on tables throughout the world in a variety of guises ranging from sauce to juice (low-calorie and otherwise), to cranberry-nut bread. Once served on clipper ships to prevent scurvy, the red berry has become a year-round treat.

The next time you buy fresh cranberries, drop several berries and notice how they bounce like lively balls. Mash one and see that like a spent ball it falls flat. Put some in water and watch them float on top. It is these very qualities of cranberries which speed their harvesting and help eliminate the bruised fruit.

A record crop of almost 78,000 tons of cranberries on 21,000 acres is being harvested in the United States this fall. Early varieties are usually gathered beginning right after Labor Day, and late, late cranberries are harvested about Thanksgiving.

Almost as many cranberries are produced in Massachusetts as in the rest of the world combined. Last year, 73.5 million pounds (735,000 barrels) of cranberries were harvested in southeastern Massachusetts. Latest estimate for the 1968 crop is 79.5 million pounds. The state's raw cranberry crop last year netted the growers more than $10.5 million.

Wisconsin, where the Algonquin Indians once enjoyed the wild berries, had the second largest crop last year 41.1 million pounds. This year more than 41 million pounds of cranberries are being harvested there.

New Jersey ranked third last year with 15.3 million pounds, though this year's crop is expected to be slightly less.

Washington State is next and finally Oregon, where members of the Lewis and Clark expedition enjoyed cranberries some 160 years ago.

Cranberries are truly a North American dish. These five states produce most of the world's supply.

Demand for the berries has spread far beyond American shores. Fresh cranberries are shipped to England, Ireland, Belgium, the Netherlands, Venezuela, West Germany and Saudi Arabia. Frozen cranberries are sent to Australia, and cranberry products go to several dozen foreign countries.

Leader in the field of new cranberry products is Ocean Spray Cranberries, Inc., a national farmer cooperative of more than 1,000 growers, which handles more than 80 per cent of the U.S. cranberry crop.

Recently the cranberry has gone scientific. In fact, cranberry research is making such progress that last winter Dr. Chester Cross, head of the University of Massachusetts' Cranberry Experiment Station, invited the state's cranberry growers to a series of lectures and discussions at Buzzards Bay, Mass., to bring them up-to-date on cranberry production.

Several fungi, previously thought to be either rare or non-existent on cranberries, have been found by Dr. Donald Boone, plant pathologist at the University of Wisconsin, who has also developed a fungicide spray schedule to successfully control some of them.

A hovercraft developed at Princeton University under the direction of Dr. Allan Stretch, plant pathologist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, effective fungicides are pretty well known, he points out, but applying them is a problem.

A hunt for even safer pesticides for use when the insects inevitably become resistant to the present ones, is being conducted. Several formidable cranberry insects, if not controlled, could seriously reduce the crop.

Some of these pests were so destructive in the early days of cranberry culture that they were named "fireworms," because when they finished feeding on a bog it looked as if it had been destroyed by fire. Control of these insects is now possible with safe insecticides which are entirely dissipated at harvest time.

Cranberry growers in each of the five states are issued pest control instructions, which suggest chemicals to apply for control of specific pests and when to use them. And most growers keep written records of the pesticide used and exact date applied, plus quantity used and exact fields covered. These records proved vitally useful during the amino triazole scare of 1959, when cranberries treated with this chemical were recalled from the market.

The word "cranberry" was not taken from one of the many Indian names for the berry but it is a contraction of "crane" and "berry." Early settlers called the plant "cranberry" because its pale pink mid-summer blossoms curve like the neck of a crane, often seen in the lowlands enjoying the ripe fruit.

On Cape Cod, Mass., just 150 years ago, Henry Hall noticed that wild cranberries grew larger and juicier where sand from the dunes blew over the vines. He sanded his bog and thus began the cultivation of cranberries. Today most cranberry bogs or marshes are sanded every few years.

Among the many sea captains who retired to Massachusetts and took up cranberrying was Capt. Abiathar Doane. Though he amused his neighbors by planting his vines close together, he set the present pattern for planting cranberries only a half-foot apart. The Early Black variety was selected from wild cranberries about 125 years ago. Today it is preferred for juice because of its deep, rich color.

Although cranberry plantations are often called "bogs" or "marshes," the trailing evergreen plants do not actually grow in water but on swamp land near a good water supply. Water is not used only for irrigation. In spring and fall it gives frost protection. Either the plants are sprayed or the bog actually flooded for a short time. In winter many vines lie snug under a blanket of ice and snow.

It takes about five years for a bog to produce its first full harvest. With care, the plants will produce indefinitely.

Cranberry pollen is so heavy and sticky that honeybees must be depended on to pollinate the blossoms. In New Jersey it is almost essential to keep honeybees. Recent studies showed that when additional hives were used, yields were higher.

Early settlers picked cranberries by hand, everyone joining in the harvest. About a hundred years ago a wooden scoop with "fingers" was developed. Since World War II, the scoops have largely been replaced by mechanical pickers. One self-powered picker is guided around the bog like a power mower.
[1966-11-17; clipping from *Independent-Journal*, Thurs., 17 Nov 1966, with a photo of cranberries being harvested on a bog, not named, using mechanical pickers. With this is a rather extensive article by a Martha G. Morrow, “Today’s Cranberries Much Like our Forefathers Ate” which gives some historical data about the industry.]