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COLUMNS

Campbell Vaughn: Cranberries are more than just a holiday treat. Find out about the bog.

Campbell Vaughn Columnist

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Thanksgiving is past and I may have broken a record for continuous days of eating a ham sandwich since last week's festivities.

About a month ago, my wife, daughter and mother-in-law took a trip to Boston and on to Nantucket, Mass. I didn't really ask why they were going but assumed that it was a vacation of sorts. There is rumor that that region is a fun place to visit with lots of things to do and tons of history. The recap I was given when they returned was that it was a bunch of fun.

Last night, my wife showed me some pictures of the cranberry bogs she was able to see when they went to Nantucket. Being that we had two types of cranberries on the table at Thanksgiving feast, I wondered why as an agricultural agent I did not know more about how cranberries are grown. I have seen commercials for cranberry juice with the guys in the waders in a pond of red berries, but I really didn't know much more than that.

Come to find out, it isn't a pond these red balls were floating in. It is called a bog or a marsh. And cranberries are a plant related to blueberries (*Vaccinium macrocarpon*) and are native to the U.S. We don't cultivate them in Georgia, but they are native to our mountains. Farming cranberries is mostly done in the Northeast and up into Canada because the chill hours are much higher in those areas. As a reminder, chill hours are the number of hours a plant stays under 45 degrees Fahrenheit.

The plant itself is a low growing woody perennial with small leaves and spreading branches/shoots. The horizontal runners will touch the soil surface and form a new rooting, which creates a new plant and all this leading to a mass of cranberry plants. The plant flowers in late spring and must be pollinated by honeybees and bumblebees. Warmer temperatures during that blooming season keep the bees active resulting in better overall harvest.

Cranberry plants love acid peat soil and plenty of fresh water. After a good bloom and a nice summer of long northern sunlight days, September through November is harvest time. There are two ways of harvesting, dry and wet.

Campbell Vaughn: Gigantic tree that fell in Augusta after hurricane shows problems with rot

Dry harvesting uses a machine to comb berries off the vines into bags usually made of burlap. Since these cranberry patches are in a “bog”, helicopters and bog vehicles are used to carry the fruit to a processing facility. I have walked in mud which isn't fun. Imagine carrying a 100-pound bag of fruit through the mud.

Wet harvesting, which is what we are accustomed to seeing on Ocean Spray commercials, is putting on waders and getting into a flooded marsh and kind of raking the berries. But I would be considered a giant southern ignoramus to a cranberry farmer if I didn't explain the actual terms because they deserve a lot of kudos for getting into that cold water in Wisconsin in November.

Cranberries have an air pocket inside them which is why they float. A lot of times a bog will be flooded, and the farmer will use what is called an “egg beater” or water reel to stir up the water in the marsh and the berry will dislodge and float to the surface. A floating boom (which reminds me a little of a pool swimming lane rope) is used to round the cranberries up and then they are pumped out to a machine that catches them and moves them to a processing station. Wet harvesting is used 90% of the time when collecting cranberries.

The United States is the largest producer of cranberries with 403,000 tons of cranberries harvested in 2022. Wisconsin produces 60% of this U.S. crop and Massachusetts does about a quarter of the U.S. production. Oregon and New Jersey are also big players in the cranberry market.

Since cranberries have moved to a year-round product instead of just Thanksgiving and Christmas, Chile has moved heavily into farming the fruit. Their harvest season is the opposite of ours being from the Southern Hemisphere, so they are great resources for a supplemental market.

Now that you have Christmas dinner coming up in a few weeks, you will know more about these tasty tart red berries. I know a few folks that will be mixing some cranberry juice with fermented potatoes this Saturday for some college football watching.

