



Cranberry Culture Tips

The cranberry (*Vaccinium macrocarpon*) is an evergreen ground-cover plant native to the northeastern United States. Its common name comes from “crane berry” because the flower is said to resemble the head and neck of a sandhill crane. Cranberries once grew wild in the bogs and wetlands of northern Indiana (such as Gene Stratton Porter’s Limberlost Swamp). Sadly, most of these areas were drained for agricultural use.

Cranberry plants are self-pollinating and do not need two varieties to produce fruit. They grow runners (rhizomes) which trail on the ground and spread one to two feet in one season before producing short, vertical shoots called uprights, which are borne on the runners in the second and third year. **The uprights bear the flowers and fruits.** The flowering season is from early June through July. The fruit ripens in early fall. The cranberry plant is a good plant to consider for wetland and bog areas, as it can withstand long periods under water in the winter.

Cranberries grow best in full sun. Soil preparation is very important. Cranberry plants are in the same family as blueberry and rhododendron plants and require a pH of 4.0 to 5.5, which is quite acidic! In clay soils, you will need to work in sand and peat moss, with regular applications of a soil amendment such as aluminum sulfate. Every few years, it is a good idea to work in ½ inch of sand in the spring. Plant your plants 1 to 2 feet apart. Fertilize the first two years with extra nitrogen to get the runners to fill in. Cut back on nitrogen after this to encourage uprights to form at the nodes of the runners. A primary goal the first year is to keep the bed weeded, as cranberry plants do not survive well against competing weeds. The cranberry plant is shallow-rooted, with a fine root system that only grows in the upper 4 to 6 inches of soil. Thus, the plants require extra water during extremely hot, dry summers. Mulch your cranberry bed to protect it during the winter.

Once your plants begin to bear fruit, harvest the berries *before* the first frost. Although the plants can withstand frosts and freezes, the fruit cannot stand temperatures below 30⁰F. In the third year, a light pruning of long runners is recommended to encourage more uprights. Do not prune the uprights.

The cranberry is a good plant to consider for wetland and bog areas. However, the plants are not grown under water, as the TV commercials seem to suggest. [Commercial growers flood the fields during harvest to elevate the fruit for easy picking!] Because of their high antioxidant content, cranberries are considered beneficial for cardiovascular and urinary tract health and have many other nutritional benefits.

For more information on growing cranberries, visit www.cranberrycreations.com

