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Cranberry country

Southern Oregon cranberry growers leading the trend toward sustainable farms

By [Sarah Lemon](#)

November 23, 2009 5:00 AM

Swig some cranberry juice, and odds are the sweet-tart, nutrient-rich beverage comprises fruit from the East Coast, Midwest and Northwest — all in one bottle.

Tired of blending in, a group of Oregon cranberry farmers are trying to make a name for themselves. They've already got sweeter, juicier, more richly hued fruit on their side, by virtue of the milder weather and longer growing season that the state's south coast enjoys. This year, the name Clearwater Cranberries is distinguishing them, along with third-party certifications that denote sustainability.



"There should be an incentive for farmers who go above and beyond to safeguard our environmental health — and our health," says Allison Hensey, director for the Oregon Environmental Council's healthy food and farm program.

Working for the past three years under grants administered by the Oregon Environmental Council and South Coast Watershed Council, the McKenzie family of Seaview Cranberries and Farr family of Elk River Farms improved salmon habitat on their properties near Port Orford, introduced non-chemical means for pest management and took steps to conserve more water. The measures earned Food Alliance certification with Salmon-Safe approval soon to follow.

"We saw the greatest potential for change with the cranberry growers," Hensey says, explaining why the crop was singled out among the region's agricultural industry. "It's an important area to make changes."

Oregon's Coos and Curry counties are home to some 180 cranberry farmers, who cultivate about 2,000 acres of bogs that yield nearly 7 percent of the national crop. While the two largest U.S. producers, Wisconsin and Massachusetts, reported harvests declining by as much as 20 percent this year, Oregon — the country's fourth-largest cranberry producer — anticipates a harvest that will exceed last year's by 23 percent, according to the National Agricultural Statistics Service.

The ubiquitous "wet-harvest" method for cranberries is an autumn spectacle on Oregon's south coast, where farmers flood their bogs, many visible from Highway 101. Loosened from their vines, the ripe berries float, creating a ruby carpet on the water's surface, often shimmering under sun-drenched skies.

Historically, most berries were bound for an Ocean Spray receiving plant before mingling with berries from all over the country under the nationwide brand. But more and more farmers, like the McKenzies and Farris, are breaking free from the unpredictable commodities market.

"We really want to separate Oregon fruit from other fruit," says cranberry farmer Michael Webb, of Winters-Webb Cranberries in Bandon. "Other entities haven't really recognized our fruit."

Farmers are relying not just on the crop's quality but on consumers' heightened interest in locally produced foods, a nationwide trend. More than organic, buyers are gravitating toward foodstuffs with a story, experts say.

"What's most important to consumers is trust in where their food is coming from," Hensey says. "There's real potential for those market connections."

Many of those connections are literally being made at farmers markets. Because Clearwater Cranberries is soliciting wholesale accounts, it doesn't have the visibility of some fruit and vegetable growers. Direct retail sales aren't feasible in Clearwater's first year, Hensey says.

The brand's first customers are Bon Appetit Management Co., a caterer for college and business campuses; Grand Central Bakery, of Portland, and Burgerville of Vancouver, Wash. Clearwater, which processes its berries at Scenic Fruit in Gresham, also is courting a Portland-area grocery chain. Few berries are consumed fresh; most are dried, individually quick-frozen or converted to concentrate.

While testing the waters of independent sales, Clearwater is still unloading some cranberries through the conventional commodity system. The ultimate goal, Hensey says, is to sell all participating farmers' berries under the Clearwater brand and

involve more farm partners in the business. There are plenty of inroads on the south coast, where about half the farmers are independent of Ocean Spray, says Scott McKenzie of Seaview Cranberries.

"It's a niche that we can fill," he says.

Although the cranberry's status as "super food" has been eclipsed in recent years by the more exotic pomegranate and even acai berry, cranberry farmers aren't seeing a decreased demand for their crop, McKenzie says. Projecting a harvest of half a million pounds of cranberries this year, McKenzie will double his acreage over the coming months to 44 planted in bogs, a term for the field's engineering rather than its natural topography.

Oregon cranberries, McKenzie says, don't actually grow in wetlands. Suited to sandy, well-drained soil, the perennial cranberries thrive on upland dunes that also support pine trees, huckleberries and grasses.

"The cranberries grow on probably the most marginal 'ag' ground around," McKenzie says.

Cranberry fields are enclosed with dikes that retain water, facilitating harvest. For most of the year, the bogs are dry and exposed to weed infestation.

But Clearwater farmers Randy and Gretchen Farr are experimenting with leaving the bogs water-logged through the winter for the purposes of weed control and inhibiting some insect larvae. By February, the Farris skip an annual application of granular herbicide and after several years have noticed an uptick in amphibian life, one step toward obtaining third-party certifications in sustainability.

"We're maybe somewhere in between organic and conventional," says Gretchen Farr.

The Farris also implemented pheromone traps for the cranberry farmer's main enemy: fire worms. The traps help farmers gauge when the fire-worm moth has invaded, so they can target pesticide use, which minimizes impact on other, beneficial insects. Toward the same end, McKenzie set up bird boxes to invite swallows to feast on the pests.

McKenzie terraces his bogs so the initial volume of water used to flood one bog for harvest can flood five bogs, which also saves electricity. Watershed phosphorus levels, elevated by fertilizers and decaying leaves, is a concern for agencies certifying farmers. To counteract some of their impact, the Farris removed gorse, an invasive

plant, from streambeds on their property and built up salmon habitat for the native chinook and coho, as well steelhead and cutthroat trout.

"It's so neat that the salmon still come up these rivers," says Gretchen Farr, 40. "I think our goal was to undo some of the man-made changes."

The couple's efforts will help preserve both the family-run farm and surrounding ecosystem for their 3-year-old and 1-year-old sons.

"It's just a great lifestyle," Farr says. "We love being able to be parents and raise the cranberries at the same time."

Cranberry Facts

Cranberries are one of three fruits considered native to North America (the others are blueberries and Concord grapes). A mainstay of many American Indian diets, cranberries were incorporated into pemmican, a mixture of meat scraps, rendered fat and dried fruits and berries.

Cranberries also were used in medicinal poultices and as a fabric dye.

Today, cranberries are known to be high in the immune-system booster vitamin C and antioxidants, which help reduce toxins and protect against the effects of free radicals in the human body.

Consuming cranberries also has been linked to a reduced risk of heart disease and low-density lipoproteins (bad cholesterol), along with increased levels of high-density lipoproteins (good cholesterol).

Cranberries also are thought to promote oral health, reduce the risk of cancer and other chronic diseases, inhibit bacteria (including *E. coli*) from adhering to the urinary tract, while guarding against stroke, stomach ulcers and infections.

For more information, see the Web sites

www.clearwatercranberries.com, www.oeconline.org, www.uscranberries.com and www.cranberryinstitute.org.