

News

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Turning cranberries green

By Steve McCasland
Staff writer

The move toward greener practices at home and work has produced “Cranberries with a Conscience” on the South Coast of Oregon.

Using environmentally friendly farming practices to protect soil and water quality, and helping to preserve an agricultural economy for future generations are goals of Clearwater Cranberries LLC, a collaborative effort of Gretchen and Randy Farr of Elk River Farms and Scott and Carol McKenzie of Seaview Cranberries.



Photo by Steve McCasland - Randy Farr runs a cranberry beater at his family's Elk River Farms, showing guests how berries are harvested by flooding the bog with water.

The Farrs have been growing cranberries on a bench overlooking Elk River since 2002, while the McKenzies and their families have been ranching or farming on Sixes Airport Road for decades.

Over the past few years, both families have worked with the Oregon Environmental Council and the South Coast Watershed Council in an effort to reduce the impact of their farms on the environment and to improve water quality. In addition to doing stream restoration work on their properties, both farms have adopted less toxic methods of dealing with pests and disease.

On Oct. 16 and 17, Clearwater Cranberries, along with the EOC and SCWC, hosted a cranberry harvest celebration at the families' northern Curry County farms.

While leading guests on a tour of her family's bogs, Gretchen Farr explained that in addition to using less toxic pesticides and herbicides, the growers of Clearwater Cranberries for the past several years have allowed their bogs to remain flooded for eight to 10 weeks after the fall harvest to discourage pests. The perennial plants go dormant then, and don't mind the water.

“We feel better about using water in lieu of herbicides, when possible,” Farr said. “And we prefer spot applications of herbicide to blanket application.”

The growers also have learned to spray pesticides at the appropriate time for a specific pest, and they've been using new products that target specific species, like fire worms — a major pest.

Farr added that they've found fewer worms and spiders on their bogs recently than they did in the past.

In addition to using less toxic means to control pests, the Clearwater growers regularly inspect their bogs for the presence of unwelcome critters. And they monitor the health of their bogs with annual plant tissue and soil testing.

"We then adjust the fertilizing the next year, if necessary, allowing us to use fertilizer more efficiently," Scott McKenzie explained.

The McKenzies have reduced their use of phosphorus fertilizer in recent years and have had success using compost tea instead of synthetic fertilizers on newly installed bogs.

The family lets its harvest water, which has an elevated level of phosphorus that would encourage the growth of algae if allowed to run off into streams and lakes, soak into the ground at the end of the harvest. It can then be reabsorbed into the soil.

"This is an inexpensive way to reduce the amount of phosphorus returning to the watershed," McKenzie said.

The Clearwater Cranberries farmers are working with Oregon State University to study the effects of new low-impact herbicides that are more bee-friendly. They'll also continue to experiment with alternative fertilizers, low-impact insecticides, and other methods to reduce impacts on water quality.

One of the collaborative's goals is "to continue to improve" its environmentally friendly practices, Farr told her guests.

McKenzie agreed, but noted that his family's farm and the Farris' operation aren't the only ones that have switched to more Earth-friendly practices.

"What we are doing isn't unique to us," he said. "Lots of growers in this area do a very good job" of farming in an environmentally responsible way.

Clearwater Cranberries has received Food Alliance certification, meaning the berries are produced by farmers that use environmentally friendly, socially responsible, sustainable practices.

Fluctuations in commodity market pricing are part of the reason that Clearwater Cranberries came into existence. With the assistance of EOC and others, the Farris and McKenzies have begun developing direct sales opportunities outside the commodity market.

The Farris will sell some of their crop this year to Scenic Fruit Co. of Portland. Scenic Fruit will handle drying, freezing and packaging the berries for the ingredient, food service and retail markets.

McKenzie said he plans to pay a company to process about half of his crop into cranberry concentrate that he'll sell himself. He hopes the rest of his fresh and frozen berries will be purchased by high-end West Coast markets.

Farr said, "Hopefully, we'll receive a higher price for our product — similar to those received for organically grown items — because it's a better product."

Clearwater Cranberries are distributed in the Northwest by Duck Delivery and Provvista Specialty Foods. More information is available on the Internet at www.clearwatercranberries.com.

Growers interested in learning more about or collaborating with Clearwater Cranberries can call Scott at 297-6534 or Gretchen at (541) 253-8300.

