

Cranberries Part of Thanksgiving

With Thanksgiving coming, many of us will prepare the traditional meal that features turkey, mashed potatoes, pumpkin pie and cranberry sauce. All of these foods originated in the Americas, and the cranberry is one of the few fruits native to North America that is commercially grown and distributed worldwide. Others are blueberries and Concord grapes.

Cranberries have been eaten by Native Americans for centuries, and they introduced the fruit to the pilgrims. Legend indicates that cranberries were served at the first Thanksgiving feast, and they have been popular during this time of year since. Cranberries were first farmed in the early 1800s and now, according to the Ocean Spray company, Americans consume over 400 million pounds of cranberries a year. Twenty percent of these are eaten during the holiday season.

Cranberries are very nutritious. Sailors ate them to prevent scurvy. They are higher in antioxidants than most other fruits and they can help prevent urinary tract infections in females. They may also help prevent the formation of kidney stones.

Cranberry plants are woody vines and native to bogs that grow best in acidic soil. Unfortunately, Utah generally does not have this, and when planted in our soil, cranberries commonly develop an iron deficiency.

The berries ripen in late September to early October. Cranberry fields are flooded and the ripe berries float to the surface of the water and are harvested. The berries are tested for quality by a process called the "bounce test." This involves rolling the berries down a series of stairs. Only the best, undamaged berries make it to the bottom of the steps and these are the berries that are sold fresh in stores.

Growing up, I always thought cranberry sauce came from a can. I refused to eat it because it looked like a disgusting gelatinous mass that retained the shape of the can when it was removed. Food is just not supposed to do that. However, I later discovered that cranberry sauce can be easily made at home.

The easiest recipe I located was from the Ocean Spray Web site. Ingredients include 1 cup of water, 1 cup of sugar and 12 ounces of fresh or frozen cranberries. Bring the sugar and water to a boil, then add the cranberries. Allow the mix to return to a boil, reduce heat and boil for an additional 10 minutes. Cover and cool to room temperature. Refrigerate until serving. The recipe makes 2¼ cups. I have not personally tried this recipe, but the picture on the recipe looks much more appetizing than the gelatinous blob my Mom tried to get me to eat when I was younger.

As a reminder, applications are being accepted for the 2009 Master Gardener classes. Download an application at <http://extension.usu.edu/cache/htm/horticulture>. You can also call 435-752-6263 for further information. Classes will begin in mid-February.