

Gifted Ideas

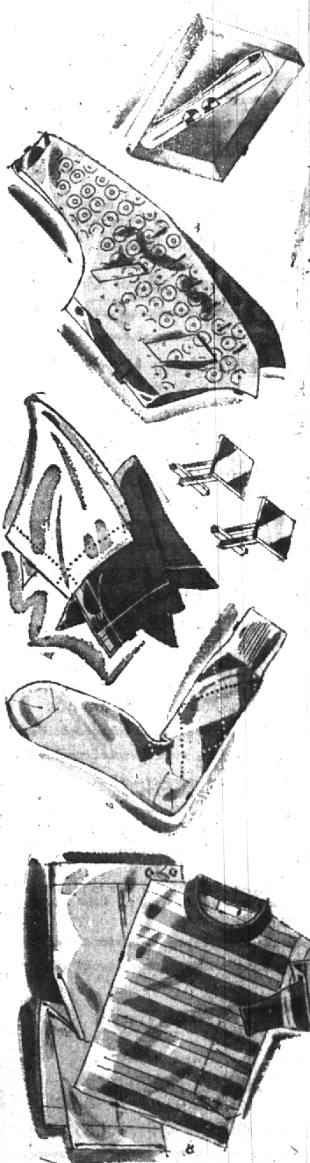
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NATURE NOW

Old-Time Cranberry Used as Medicine

By LYDIA KING FREHSE
Special Writer for The Birmingham Eccentric

When a naturalist strikes out to explore a bog he knows he will come away having seen that which he is not likely to find elsewhere. He is impervious to the mosquitoes which devour him, to the muck which fills his shoes, to the uncertain footing of the quaking plant mass which supports him, to the threat of poisonous snakes.

For the bog conceals and protects that which it holds: the white velvety flower of buckbean, the insect-eating leaves of the pitcher plant, the rarest of our native orchids. It also holds the delicate trailing stems of the cranberry plant which produces one of our most versatile fruits.

In the early days of my botanizing in Michigan I took group to explore just such a habitat opposite the Hartwick Pines State Park north of Grayling.

HERE, INTERWOVEN in the plant blanket, I saw for the first time the cranberry growing wild. Since that day I have seen it often and each time I marvel at how so delicate a plant can support so large a berry.

The relatives of the cranberry in the large heath family include such shrubs as azalea, rhododendron, heather, bearberry and wintergreen, such bog dwellers as Labrador tea, wild rosemary and leatherleaf.

Most of our fruits have come to us from warmer tropical shores. But the cranberry is truly an American plant. It is native to bogs and swamps from New England to New Jersey and west to Wisconsin.

IN OUR OWN state we have two species *Vaccinium oxycoccos*—the small variety, and *Vaccinium macrocarpon*—a larger variety which is the common cranberry of commerce.

Sometimes these grow together in the same habitat, but the former is partial to spruce while the latter is more likely to occur in a cedar-tamarac association. Both varieties prefer the sandy bogs of our coastal counties. Although cranberries are not grown commercially in Michigan, in a good season many bushels are gathered by individuals for local use.

The nodding pink flowers suggesting a crane's beak gave rise to the name "crane" berry which was later contracted to "cranberry." Fertilized by bees, the blooms appear in June and July and produce a true many-seeded berry which ripens in September and October.

WILD CRANBERRIES reddened the Cape Cod region long before the Indians joined our Pilgrim fathers in the first Thanksgiving. They were used by the redmen for both food and medicine.

A kind of pemmican was made by mixing them with dried deer meat. The acid pulp was used as a curative poultice for infected wounds. These culinary and medicinal uses of the cranberry were a life-saver to the early settlers through those first hard winters when starvation and death knocked at every door.

Today we cannot imagine the luxury of such a supply of wild fruit which remained available on the vines all through the winter.

This wild abundance was more than sufficient for 200 years until the cranberry was first cultivated on Cape Cod.

IN 1816 Henry Hall of Dennis, Mass., began experimenting with "building" a bog to extend the range of cranberry culture. Thirty years later the first true bog was built at Harwich and by 1855 Cape Cod had 197 acres of cranberry bogs.

Massachusetts now grows about 60 per cent of the nation's crop on 27,000 acres of land. The other 40 per cent is produced by New Jersey, Wisconsin, Washington and Oregon.

The annual cranberry harvest totals approximately a million barrels with a value of more than two million dollars. This provides for meals throughout the year as well as at the holiday season.

The "bush" bog duplicates as closely as possible the native bog. Peat is graded and covered with a three-inch layer of sand. The bed is planted in April with cuttings set out in rows six inches apart.

THE VINES soon root and send out creeping runners which fasten themselves at the nodes. In three years the whole is a well-rooted established mass of interwoven plants with the large red berries growing on small upright branches decorated with tiny evergreen leaves.

An artificial bog must be carefully guarded from frost during spring and fall. This is accomplished by flooding for the rising vapor serves as a protective blanket. The plantations are also kept under water during the winter lest the plants dry out.

New layers of sand must be added each year and insect invaders are kept at bay by the use of chemicals sprayed from the air.

Until some years ago, harvesting the cranberry crop was a laborious hand process as the glistening berries were picked one by one from the vines. Then the wooden cranberry scow was invented.

With this device a skilled picker could "comb" through the vines gathering 100 pounds of berries per hour.

NOW MUCH of this work is done by mechanical pickers. Then the "lugs" are taken by trucks to screening houses where the berries are sorted and graded. There they are washed, air dried in mesh baskets and sent on their way to canning plants or to the packers, who supply your grocer with the familiar quart packages encased in cellophane.

When father has finished carving the holiday turkey, he doesn't need for a moment reluctant to spoil the beautiful symmetry of the glowing mound before him.

Then, with an air of complete confidence he serves each plate with a generous spoonful, alongside "a slice of light" and "a slice of dark" meat. He knows you will like it.

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