

Cranberries as a Ground Cover

Michael V. DeGrandchamp

DeGrandchamp Farms Inc. 15575 7th St. South Haven, Michigan 49090

INTRODUCTION

Most everyone is familiar with the fruit of *Vaccinium macrocarpon*. Cranberries are a traditional fruit with our Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners. Very few people are aware of the potential of this plant as an attractive groundcover.

The American cranberry (*V. macrocarpon*) has all of the attributes of a great groundcover. It is a native North American evergreen vine, wetland adapted, and hardy in U.S.D.A. Zones 2 to 6 (Dirr, 1990). Cranberries have four seasons of appeal with flowers, fruit, and summer and winter foliage. The cranberry is more American than apple pie.

Vaccinium macrocarpon is indigenous to the North American continent. When colonists arrived they found cranberries growing on the peat bogs of Cape Cod and surrounding areas in Massachusetts. Native cranberries were found south in the Pine Barrens in New Jersey, to the North in the Maritime Provinces of Canada, in isolated areas in the Allegheny Mountains in Pennsylvania, and in the peat swamps in Virginia. As the westward migration of settlers continued, cranberries were found growing in the wetlands of Indiana, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota (Eck, 1990).

The American cranberry is a low-growing perennial vine that spreads by runners or stolons. The cranberry flowers in early to late June with inflorescence resembling the neck, head, and bill of a crane (Eck, 1990). Thus the name crane berry evolved to cranberry. The fruit begins to ripen and turn red in September and is picked in October. The leaves turn a reddish purple in the fall and winter and lustrous dark green in spring and summer (Dirr, 1990).

In the spring of 1992 DeGrandchamp Farms Inc. decided to diversify our operation by including cranberry production to our existing 150-acre blueberry farm and nursery. Vines of several named cultivars from Wisconsin were obtained and propagated for a stock block. During the first growing season, some of our garden center and landscape customers wanted to know what that beautiful groundcover was. They were amazed when they learned the plants were cranberries. They thought that they only grew in water. Most peoples' knowledge of cranberries are of ripe berries floating in commercial farm bogs or marshes during harvest. Cranberries can tolerate flooding during dormant periods, but they don't grow in water.

GROWING

Planting Procedures and Sites. *Vaccinium macrocarpon* is an ericaceous plant and needs acidic well drained soils. They will grow anywhere rhododendrons and other acid-loving plants thrive. Planting cranberries in the landscape requires the same soil preparation as would be done for rhododendron. The use of peat moss incorporated in the soil and planting in raised beds in clay soils is essential. Small 4-inch pots can be planted 12 inches to 18 inches apart and will fill in within a year. Mulching with fine pinebark when first planted will help the runners root. Full sun will increase flowering and fruit set, but they can tolerate some shade. Because

cranberries are an evergreen vine, windswept exposed sites should be avoided unless winter protection of snow or straw mulch can be provided. In more protected sites no winter protection is needed. In our nursery, cranberries are grown in 4 inch and 1-gal pots and overwintered outside above ground with only normal snowcover during winter. Planting in large tubs or planters is very successful by using an acid mix of peat and pine bark (1 : 1, v/v).

Water and Fertilizer. Adequate soil moisture needs to be maintained because the plants are shallow rooted.

Good drainage needs to be maintained during the growing season. Avoid excess nitrogen fertilizers after plants have become established. This will promote upright fruiting growth instead of vegetative runner growth.

Maintenance. Cranberries are relatively pest free and form a dense mat that suppresses weed problems. Excess vine overgrowth should be trimmed off to promote better fruit ripening and development. Pick the fruit when dark red and store in your refrigerator until Thanksgiving.

Vaccinium macrocarpon makes an excellent alternative to many evergreen groundcovers. It is a native wetland plant, with excellent four-season appeal. The beauty and versatility of cranberries makes them ideal for increased use in northern gardens.

LITERATURE CITED

Eck, P. 1990. The American Cranberry. Rutgers University Press. pp. 1,49.

Dirr, M. 1990 Manuel of woody landscape plants: Their identification, ornamental characteristics, culture, propagation and uses, 4th ed. Stipes Publ. Co. Champaign, Illinois. pp. 887-888.