

Growing cranberries

IN THE Umpqua Valley



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You'll need a 12-18 inch wide container, 8 inches deep pot in order to grow cranberries in a container.

Question: What can you tell me about growing cranberries in the Umpqua Valley? I always assumed cranberries were difficult to grow. Don't they grow in a swamp? Don't you need to flood the fields?



Chris Rusch
Ask a Master Gardener

Answer: The truth is that growing cranberries isn't much different than growing other small fruits like blueberries or raspberries. The berries themselves grow on a low-growing perennial groundcover.

Historically, Oregon native cranberries were grown in the northwestern part of the state.

The indigenous people of North America have been using cranberries for thousands of years as food, dye for clothes and as medicine. The native cranberries were a good source of vitamin C and because of the extra waxy coating, they were able to be stored for a long period of time.

The first cranberries to be cultivated were in 1816 by Captain Henry Hall in Massachusetts. Commercial cranberry farming began in Oregon in 1885 when Charles McFarlan planted cranberry cuttings he brought from Massachusetts. He settled in Coos County, which is still the top producing county for Oregon cranberries.

Nearly 3,000 acres of cranberries are cultivated in Oregon, with production centered in the southern coastal towns of Bandon, Langlois, Sixes and Port Orford.

Oregon growers produce approximately 40 million pounds of berries each year.

The cranberry (genus *Vaccinium*) is native to the swamps and bogs of northeastern North America. It belongs to the heath, or heather family (Ericaceae), which is a very widespread family of about 125 genera and about 3,500 species! Members of the family occur from polar regions to the tropics in both hemispheres.

The cranberry plant is described as a low-growing, woody perennial with oval leaves borne on vine-like shoots. Horizontal runners grow along the soil surface, rooting at intervals to form a dense mat. Its flower buds, formed on short, upright shoots, open from May or June, with the berries



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ripening by late September or early October.

It is important to have warm, sunny weather during the bloom period, as that is the best formula for maximizing pollination by the cranberry's two biggest pollinators, bumble bees and honeybees (cranberries rely on insect pollination because the pollen grains are too heavy to be carried around much at all by the wind).

In general, cranberries

need soil that drains well, has a low pH and a high level of organic matter. Plant cranberries in full sun but not in a location that gets too hot. Use plenty of mulch to control weeds and maintain moisture. While they do like a lot of moisture, they do not thrive in oversaturated conditions. Keep in mind the fact that on average, a cranberry plot reaches 4 feet by 8 feet.

However, if you decide to grow just a single plant,

you can manage with a 2 foot by 2 foot square. Left to their own devices, cranberry plants send out runners a bit like strawberry plants, and re-root as they go until they cover large areas of soil.

The main care they require is maintaining adequate, even moisture – one inch of water per week is usually sufficient, depending on weather conditions. Be extra vigilant during dry spells or heatwaves. For planting in pots, you'll need a 12-18 inch wide container, 8 inches deep.

You can grow cranberries from rooted cuttings or nursery starts available from your local garden center for transplanting. Here are some varieties for you to consider:

■ Early Black is a vigorous grower, producing dark red berries that, as the name suggests, ripen early – typically from late August in most locales. The fruit is relatively sweet, when compared to other varieties. It's not fussy about soil, exhibits some resistance to false bloom, and is frost-tolerant.

■ Pilgrim is a popular hybrid cross of 'McFarlan' and 'Prolific.' Attractive, dark pink flowers give way to an abundance of shiny, plump, dark red berries, which

are especially juicy and delicious.

■ Stevens is a popular hybrid variety producing an abundance of deep red, juicy fruits. A cross between 'McFarlan' and 'Potter,' plants are moderately resistant to false blossom.

The fruit of the cranberry plants will become apparent the year after planting, more in the second and following years depending on the number of pollinators visiting your cranberry plot.

You will know your cranberries are ready for harvest when they are an even deep red color, slightly firm to the touch, usually in autumn. As long as you can fulfill these conditions – acidic soil with lots of organic matter, and plenty of water – you could soon have your own cranberry plants, with berries ready for harvest in time for next Thanksgiving.

Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu or 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.