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## Natural History Notes

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### The Moss Melon



The cranberry is a true native American fruit. It was used by the Indians as a dye, a poultice and an ingredient in pemmican. Pemmican is a jerky-like food made with venison which provided vitamins and protein throughout the winter. No attempt was made to cultivate the cranberry until the early 1800's. Today commercial cranberry growing is an important industry in Massachusetts, New Jersey and Wisconsin.

The cranberry grows in acidic peat bogs. Generally the bogs must be able to be flooded for pest control, harvesting, frost protection and irrigation. It is an exacting business, but cranberries do grow in the wild. They are found in Asia, Europe and North America. Here they are found from Newfoundland south to North Carolina and west to Washington and Alaska.

The cranberry is a trailing species of genus *Vaccinum*, a member of the heath family. This family, *Ericaceae*, is characterized by generally thick, leathery leaves, woody, shrubby growth and favoring acidic bogs or mountainous areas as habitat. Included in the family are rhododendrons, azaleas, laurels, trailing arbutus and wintergreen. In the same genus as cranberry is the blueberry.

There are two species of true cranberry, the large cranberry and (you guessed it) the small cranberry. Neither of these should be confused with the highbush cranberry which belongs to another family altogether. The large cranberry is cultivated commercially and the small cranberry which does not adapt well to cultivation is picked in the wild for home consumption.

The cranberry has branches up to four feet long but these trail along the ground so the plant may only be about 6 to 12 inches high. The pink bell-shaped flowers, which are insect pollinated, appear in May, June and early July. The fruit ripens in August, September and October and may stay on the branches throughout the winter. The cultivated varieties of cranberries differ in size, shape, color and ripening time of the berries.

The thick leathery leaves of the cranberry are dark green above and light colored underneath. They are 3/4 inch long by 1/2 inch wide with the margins curved downward and inward. The ripened fruit of the cranberry is red, spherical and about 1/2 inch in diameter, the cultivated ones being up to one inch across. The fruit is very tart and requires salt or sugar to counteract the sourness.

Harvesting of the commercial cranberry is achieved by first flooding the bog. Then machines are run through the bog which disturbs the water enough to dislodge the ripe berries. These berries, which float, are then gathered and taken to be processed. At the processing plant the cranberries are bounced over four inch barriers. The ones that don't make it are discarded. The ones that make the grade (or bounce) are then made into juice, sauce, jelly or packaged and sold fresh.

The cranberry is also known as moss melon, crowberry, moorberry or sourberry. It is as much an American tradition as turkey or pumpkin pie. You could say that it just bounced its way into our homes.