

# Cranberry Production in Michigan

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Michigan has a long history of cranberry production. Early records show over a dozen commercial cranberry operations in the state at the beginning of this century (Corbett, 1903). These operations eventually disappeared, though the reasons are not clear. The demand for cranberries during the last decade stimulated renewed interest, and today there are about 165 acres of cranberries managed by ten individuals. All but one of these plantings is less than 6 years old. Most plantings are situated in the “blueberry belt”, near the Lake Michigan shore in southwest Michigan. These plantings were established on the acidic, sandy soils typical of blueberry plantings. The sites have natural water tables within a foot or two of the surface. Two plantings are located in northern Michigan on sites that may be more typical of many in Wisconsin. Stevens accounts for about two thirds of the acreage, followed by Pilgrim, Searles, and Ben Lear. Michigan growers have used both plug plants and vines to establish plantings.

## **Michigan Strengths**

Michigan offers a number of potential advantages over some other states pursuing a cranberry industry. With over 140,000 acres of fruit crops, Michigan has an extensive fruit handling, storage, and processing infrastructure that could facilitate the development of a cranberry industry. There appear to be adequate suitable sites for cranberries. State agencies are working to facilitate the development of cranberry acreage. The Michigan Department of Agriculture (MDA) developed Generally Accepted Agricultural and Management Practices to help potential growers understand regulatory aspects of site selection and protect current growers from nuisance complaints. The state legislature and Michigan State University have provided support for cranberry research. MDA, Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ), and MSU developed a Cranberry Expert Team, which, on request by landowners, visits sites and makes initial assessments of the potential for cranberry production. MSU and MDA funded a detailed market analysis for cranberries in 1998, which has helped individuals make planting decisions.

## **Some Challenges**

The primary challenge at this time is growing a new crop in new areas. Michigan has several distinct climatic zones. The southwest part of the state that contains most of the plantings experiences winter conditions that are most similar to Massachusetts, whereas winters in northern Michigan are more analogous to central Wisconsin. With no recent production history, growers are not sure whether the disease and insect complexes will develop to be similar to those in Wisconsin, Massachusetts, or a combination of the two. Current sites vary greatly in soil and water characteristics, so the same rules regarding fertilization and water management will not apply to everyone. Growers are learning how to manage water alkalinity levels, which are often higher than those observed in traditional production states. Although the current growers are very astute individuals,

few have cranberry experience, so growers and extension workers alike are on steep learning curves.

As more fruit is harvested during the next couple years, growers will be challenged to find suitable markets. Until the Michigan industry grows and demonstrates a production capacity, most growers will be looking to local processors and possibly fresh markets.

### **Regulatory Structure**

One of the first difficulties confronted by potential growers were the confusing wetland regulations and administering agencies. Michigan differs from many states in that the state Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) administers Section 404 of the Federal Clean Water Act. Potential growers apply for wetland permits through the MDEQ, although the Army Corps of Engineers, Detroit District is responsible for navigable waters and adjacent wetland, and also reviews permit applications for larger operations.

### **The Future**

Current growers are optimistic about cranberries, and it appears that planting will continue at least at a modest rate. This last December, growers indicated they were committed to planting at least 65 additional acres in 1999. The industry may grow more quickly than this. Muskegon County in southern Michigan owns about 1,900 acres of land that could accommodate up to 1,000 acres of cranberries. A study in 1998 concluded, by recommending that cranberry production be pursued, but that a processing facility originally considered was not justified based on the processing capacity already in the state. The county funded a detailed engineering study that is underway, and will decide how to proceed when the study is completed in 1999. Another substantial planting of over 100 acres is planned by one individual in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan.

### **Literature Cited**

Corbett, L.C. 1903. Cranberry Culture. U.S. D.A. Farmer's Bulletin No. 176.