

Rooted in tradition

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VOICE Staff

For a local man, cranberry growing is a process organically rooted in family tradition.

Brian Ruesch has been harvesting on his small-scale, one-acre cranberry field for 15 years, just south of Wisconsin Rapids.

“My dad was the first grower in the state that was certified organic,” said the cultivator who will soon expand his production to four acres. “I followed in his footsteps. It’s definitely not an easy way of going.”

Organic is a very healthy option, Ruesch said, not that conventional isn’t, but without pesticides and herbicides, consumers know exactly what has went in, or onto, what they’re eating.

“The fact that I can stay small,” he said, “and doing so allows me to stay organic, is also an advantage.”

Cranberry farmers — large and small alike — are in the middle of the annual harvest, which happens each fall. With Wood County the largest cranberry producer in the nation, it helps Wisconsin become the country’s top cranberry producing state for the 16th consecutive year.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture National Agricultural Statistics Service projected a 10 percent increase over 2009 – with Wisconsin yielding 4.35 million cranberries during the 2010 fall harvest, according to a release from the Wisconsin State Cranberry Growers Association.

“Wisconsin growers are looking forward to another bountiful crop this year,” said Tom Lochner, executive director of the WSCGA, in the release. “It’s been a good summer for all things green and growing, and it’s a positive sign that the state’s largest fruit crop continues to grow and flourish.”

But the record numbers have some worried about an oversupply.

“Growers need to know that underutilization will come crashing down on us,” said John Decas, owner of Decas Cranberry Products, in a July story in the VOICE of Wisconsin Rapids.

With the industry producing about 7 million barrels each year, it will only take two more years until the supply will be more than the harvest, according to a study by the Cranberry Marketing Committee, a federally created group that represents all 1,200 cranberry growers in the country.

“We have berries from 2008 in the freezers in Wisconsin,” said Decas, who is also a board member on the committee.

While the vast majority of farmers grown for general consumption, Ruesch opens up his operation to inspectors to maintain the organic certification.

Everything that goes onto the soil has to be recorded and an inspector comes every year to monitor the operations.

But, not only does the certification process take a long time – the transition to organic from a conventional farm would take three years – and a lot of paperwork, for Ruesch, organic cranberries call for a different way of harvesting.

Many conventional growers flood the cranberry bogs, causing the fruit to float to the surface, but the local cranberry grower said that reduces the shelf life of a product.

Instead, Ruesch uses a soft maple rake, which is designed by a local Amish farmer to look a giant scoop with teeth on the end that pulls the cranberry from the vine.

It's best if the cranberries grow in the same direction by training the vines to go the same way, Ruesch said. If they are going the wrong way, the harvest is more difficult and the vines can be torn out.

"The berries are also much drier when we do it this way," he said. "We don't use any water in the harvest. This gives them a much larger storage life, and it is much gentler on the berries, so there is less bruising and less need to be discarded."

To make sure the berries are as dry as possible, Ruesch and two or three helpers usually start to harvest the first part of fall, and try to begin when there is no frost watch the night before, because a constant sprinkle will take a long time to dry on a cranberry patch.

It makes for a long process, he said, usually about 40 hours of work per acre, before being put in a cooler at his farm, and then sent to a local organic processor that separates the good berries from the bad. From there, his product is sold at markets locally and in southern Wisconsin and in Minneapolis, Minn. They are also available online. (www.organic-cranberries.com)

An acre field can yield anywhere from 4,000 pounds of cranberries in a bad year to 12,000 pounds on a good one, Ruesch said.

"It is so up and down," he said, "because with organic, it is hard to keep a consistent crop."

The crop will probably be lower than normal because of how wet it has been year-round.

There are yields of 20 to 25 percent of that of conventional growers, Ruesch said, making organic cranberry growing much less productive.

"We do get more money per pound," he said, "which isn't really an offset for a small operation like this."