



## NATURE AT RISK

By Carol Hillestad for the Brodhead Watershed Association

### A Thanksgiving Staple That Connects Us to the Past

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Is any other American holiday more deeply layered in myth and folklore than Thanksgiving?

We can't even be sure who went first. Was it the *Mayflower* Pilgrims in Plymouth in 1621? Or a Spanish explorer along the Rio Grande in 1598? Or English settlers in along the James River in Virginia celebrating their safe arrival in 1619?

Whoever and wherever it was, we can be pretty sure food was involved. And centuries before cousin Vinnie started bringing his awful jello mold, cranberries were on the menu.

Cranberries (*Vaccinium macrocarpon*) are a member of the heath family — closely related to blueberries — and native to the Poconos and much of the northeast. The Tannersville Cranberry Bog is internationally-known, but it's just one of the cold, acidic, spongy water bodies where cranberries grow in our area. The fruit ripens in November as the leaves of this evergreen woody vine change to purple-red.

Native wild cranberry bogs aren't easy to find, and that's a good thing: Over-picking ripe fruit and trampling young plants are dangers to their continued existence. Water polluted by road salt and chemical runoff is a threat. So is habitat loss from encroaching nearby landowners.

Natural forces can also cause bogs to shrink, crowding out cranberries. As saplings and shrubs take root at the edges of a bog, they can slowly, overtime, overtake the bog and change its chemistry, squeezing out the bog-lovers.

The first European arrivals may well have learned about cranberries from the Wampanoags or Powhatans they encountered. Indigenous Americans ate them raw and ground them together with dried meat and fat to create pemmican, a complete food that can stay edible for years. (You can find dozens of recipes online for pemmican, though many consider it an acquired taste.)

Whatever your favorite part of Thanksgiving may be, spare a moment's gratitude at the table this year for the wondrous natural world of which each of us is a part. Including cousin Vinnie!

*Find out more:*

<https://www.nature.org/en-us/get-involved/how-to-help/places-we-protect/tannersville-cranberry-bog-preserve/>

<https://www.apsnet.org/edcenter/apsnetfeatures/Pages/Cranberries.aspx>



*Cranberries are among the many things that go great on the Thanksgiving table. Hot-dog gelatin molds, no so much.*

*Photo: TikTok / @myjanebrain*