



All juiced up

Growing organic berries is a family affair at Springbrook Cranberry

BY JANET WALLACE



■ Rebekah Nason and her father Larry harvesting cranberries. The plants grow in soil, not water, but fields are often flooded for harvesting.

Admiring the rich ruby colour, I think to myself, “Goodness in a glass.” With its health benefits and great flavour, Springbrook Organic cranberry juice is both a tonic and a treat. Usually, I just add water to make an invigorating, tart drink. But sometimes I add sweet apple cider, or make a mocktail by adding soda and coconut water.

Drinking the juice isn’t just good for consumers. By choosing Springbrook Organic Cranberry products, we support the Nasons, an organic farm family in Tracy, NB, not far from Fredericton Junction. Larry and Kathy Nason and their daughters Rebekah and Elizabeth work hard to create excellent products while also protecting their local environment.

Succession planning done

“Succession” is a hot topic in farming today. In 2016, the average age of Canadian farmers was over 55; more farmers are over age 70 than under 35. Often, the dream is to have the next generation work the farm, and at Springbrook, the dream has become a reality. Although Larry and Kathy Nason don’t have a formal succession plan, their daughters run the farm. Rebekah is farm manager and Elizabeth does the administrative work and payroll.



“They have been taking on more and more of the decision-making process, which has not always been easy to let go of, but it’s the best thing for the farm,” Larry says with pride.

The Nasons grow cranberries on 13.6 acres of the family farm. Larry has farmed all his life, raising beef cattle, dairy cows, and sheep as well as growing greenhouse vegetables.

At a horticultural conference in the 1990s, Larry heard about commercial cranberry growing. The New Brunswick government financed farmers who were getting into cranberry production, resulting in about 25 new cranberry farms on nearly 900 acres.

New Brunswick now produces more cranberries than any other Atlantic province, possibly at the growers’ expense. With a greater volume being produced, the price has fallen below the cost of production, according to some farmers.

Organic production

Having a certified organic product means the Nasons can charge a premium price; but their costs are higher and yields are lower. The normal conventional yield is 23,000-25,000 pounds per acre. In Springbrook’s best year, they produced 16,000 pounds per acre.

“Our prices are high,” says Rebekah, “and that’s hard for us because we know we can’t reach everyone who could benefit from our products.”

Nature helps organic farmers control pests. “There seems to be more parasitic wasps around,” says Rebekah. These wasps are smaller than mosquitos. They don’t bother humans but they lay eggs in caterpillars, and the bodies or eggs of other pest species. After the wasp larvae hatch, they devour the pest from the inside out.

The main pest is the blackheaded fireworm—named because



BIGSTOCK/ VLADKIPROD



SPRINGBROOK ORGANIC CRANBERRY
ISTOCKPHOTO: LOVELIFE

■ Top: Some acres are flooded and the berries collected using booms.

■ Left: Larry cleaning twigs and leaves from dry-harvested berries.



like fire, it can decimate a field quickly. The Nasons use two products to control pests: one derived from a soil organism and the other from chrysanthemums. They can also kill pests by flooding the fields, but the trick is finding when pests are vulnerable to flooding but plants aren't.

The Nasons enlist the help of parasitic wasps, wild pollinators and other beneficial organisms by providing habitat for them. "We used to mow everything around the cranberry fields but now we mow as little as possible," says Rebekah. "There are now a lot more wildflowers around for the bees and other insects. This gives them a more diverse food supply... really important for beneficial insects."

Rather than spraying herbicides to control weeds, the Nasons hand-pull and mow weeds. They deter weeds by keeping the soil acidic, which cranberries like. They sometimes apply concentrated vinegar on specific weeds, but this is complicated because cranberry plants can be damaged by vinegar.

Keeping it all in the family

The Nason farm wasn't always organic. The family started the transition to organic production in 2005, partly because Larry wanted to keep the farm in the family.

"I was always organically-minded," says Rebekah. "My father knew the only way I would stay home on the farm was if it was organic."

She's also always helped out. "I don't know whether I was

interested in farming or it's just that I wanted to be with my dad and be outside," she explains. "I always had a love of the land."

Rebekah and Elizabeth left the province after high school. Rebekah went to the Nova Scotia Agricultural College in Truro (now Dalhousie Agricultural Campus) on a full scholarship for tuition and board. She also completed a master's in agriculture at the University of Manitoba. Elizabeth went to UPEI to study medicine, and liked the intensity of the emergency ward—but didn't care for the lifestyle.

"Something drew us back home," says Rebekah.

The Nasons have two family businesses. Kathy runs a third-generation construction company with her brother. The family's decision to switch from livestock to cranberries was influenced by the access to heavy machinery, needed to create dykes and channels so farmers can both flood and drain cranberry fields. Flooding protects plants from winter damage. Once temperatures drop to -15C, fields are flooded. After ice forms, water is released, leaving an insulating air pocket under the ice.

Harvest and products

Fresh cranberries are harvested before flooding. This labour-intensive dry harvesting collects only 70 per cent of what is wet-harvested, but dry berries are a premium product and can last for three months refrigerated.

In wet harvesting, fields are flooded and "beaters," like paddlewheelers knock the berries off the plants. The cranberries float to the surface and are collected in booms, then sent to processing facilities to be dried or juiced. Springbrook produces pure juice and Ambrosia Organic Cranberry Juice Beverage, which is sweetened, 25 per cent cranberry juice. Their dried cranberries differ from some on the market: they have a concentrated flavour that is accentuated by soaking. They're just cranberries with some added organic, fair-trade cane sugar from Just Us. The price per pound is higher than most, but you get what you pay for. The industry uses an average of 2.3 pounds of fresh cranberries to produce one pound of dried, explains Rebekah. With Springbrook, four pounds of whole berries go into one pound of dried; they don't use the pulpy leavings after the juice has been removed.

Springbrook Organic Cranberry products are used by bakers and chefs. For example, the Cackling Goose Market in Sackville, NB, uses Springbrook's fresh, dried, and frozen cranberries in many products. All products are sold at Fredericton's Boyce Farmers' Market and throughout Atlantic Canada at Sobeys.

What does the future hold? The cranberry market is volatile and unpredictable, but the Nasons remain optimistic.

"It has been a privilege for Kathy and me to have both of our daughters working here with us," says Larry. "Our goal is to hand over the farm debt-free," so Rebekah and Elizabeth can live and work on the farm as long as they want. 🍷