Cranberries in NJ: A Long and Rich History

Just One of 36 Topics You Can Enjoy at Rutgers’ Home Gardeners School on March 20!

By Greg Saitz

Good cranberries, it turns out, are like SuperBalls: they bounce.

Cranberry growers were turned onto this useful tidbit about the little red fruit by a forerunner from the 1840s: a New Jersey grower named John “Peg Leg” Webb. The oft-repeated story, with slight variations, details how Webb and his peg leg had difficulty bringing a barrel of cranberries down some steps. The barrel tipped and the cranberries tumbled.

“The bad ones would stay on the steps and the good ones would bounce to the bottom,” said Ned Lipman, director of the Rutgers Office of Continuing Professional Education, who has researched the history of cranberry farming in New Jersey.

Peg Leg’s discovery led to the development of bounce sorters that are still used today to separate good cranberries from less desirable ones, said Lipman, who also co-owns Jeffrey’s Branch Cranberry Co. in Toms River.

The Garden State has a rich cranberry history and Lipman will share some of that history during a workshop at the 34th Annual Home Gardeners School, set for March 20 and hosted by his office. For example, industrial cultivation of the fruit began in New Jersey in the 1840s and by 1910 there were 12,000 acres of production – as large as anywhere in the country, Lipman said.

These days, New Jersey is no longer the king of cranberries (that goes to Wisconsin), but growers here still cultivate about 3,500 acres of the fruit, producing about 550,000 barrels a year. Although cranberries grow in the wild throughout New Jersey, Lipman said the best soil conditions – highly acidic, sandy on top and mucky below – are found in South Jersey counties such as Burlington, Atlantic and Ocean.

History of NJ Cranberries is just one of 36 workshops being offered at this year’s Home Gardeners School. To see a complete list of all the workshops – from establishing your lawn and growing organic berries, to wine appreciation and designing great container gardens – please visit www.cpe.rutgers.edu/hgs. For more information or to register, contact the Rutgers NJAES Office of Continuing Professional Education at 732-932-9271.