

TRAVEL

You can wade in the red marshes of Wisconsin cranberry country

A fourth-generation grower explains what keeps tourists coming down the Cranberry Highway.

By **Diana Lambdin Meyer** Special to the Star Tribune | **OCTOBER 7, 2022 — 7:50AM** | [▶ Listen](#)

A bit unsure of my footing, I eased cautiously down a grassy bank, stepped gently over a yellow barrier and plunged into a bobbing, undulating sea of red.

It tickled in an odd way and I giggled out loud.

I was standing in the middle of a cranberry marsh near Wisconsin Rapids, on the first day of the harvest at Jamie and Rocky Biegel's cranberry farm. Having been raised on a Midwest grain farm, I appreciated the anticipation and energy of the first day of harvest. But this was like nothing that happens on our family farm.

Wisconsin is by far the nation's leading producer of cranberries, a colorful fruit as ubiquitous as pumpkins in celebrating the season. The state's 250 growers produce about 4.18 million barrels of cranberries a year, more than half of the world's cranberry crop.

My (literal) immersion in cranberry culture came at the hands of a fourth-generation grower. Jamie Biegel's great-grandfather started what is now the Dempze Cranberry Co. in 1900. The former warehouse where they now host events and operate a gift shop under the name Rooted in Red was built in 1938.

"I'm sure Grandpa is just enjoying what we've done with the place with a big old smile on his face," said Biegel, who raised her three children in her grandparents' home. With two of her offspring now in the business, she is hoping her grandchildren will become the sixth generation to keep the family enterprise going.

Throughout September and October, you'll find Biegel driving an ATV that pulls a wagon along the dikes that separate cranberry marshes on tours of her family farm. A blond-haired bundle of berry passion, Biegel paused often to explain various aspects of the cranberry operation and answer questions. We got out of the wagon to touch the cranberry vines. Soft greenery about as high as my ankle hid the fat, ripening berries.

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Cranberry harvest in Wisconsin Rapids, Wis.
A fourth-generation grower explains what keeps tourists coming down the Cranberry Highway. **On the banks of a cranberry marsh, Rooted in Red is the event center and gift shop for Dempze Cranberry Company in Wisconsin Rapids, Wis.**
DIANA LAMBDIN MEYER/SPECIAL TO THE STAR TRIBUNE

That cranberries grow in water is a misconception Biegel likes to correct. "We only flood the marshes when it's time to harvest because the berries float and it's just easier to rake them up then," she explained.

They drain the water as soon as harvest is over, but about the time Mother Nature gets serious about winter, Wisconsin cranberry growers flood their beds again to form a thick layer of protective ice. The vines stay a cozy 30 degrees all winter long.

Biegel's wagon tour stopped within sight of the Wisconsin River. Access to the river and the quality of the water, not to mention sand, are the reasons that cranberries grow so well here. Cranberries love sandy soil.

Every few winters, local growers sprinkle fresh sand over the ice. As temperatures rise and the ice melts, the sand settles on the vines. This suffocates any bugs and their eggs that might have survived the winter, while providing fresh sand to stimulate root growth.

Biegel also talked about sweeping the vines, and I was trying to imagine what kind of broom one would use for such a task. In reality, it's a big net or a piece of lightweight fabric waved around in the air over the marsh. The goal is to capture any insects or other flying critters that may be doing damage to the vines before it becomes visible. With that knowledge, growers can treat for insects before serious problems develop.

The predominant variety of cranberry in Wisconsin is Stevens, but cranberries are not as distinct in flavor and purpose as, say, apples. Most varieties are typically blended together and crushed for juice. Only about 20% of the crop is eaten fresh, and we'll do that between now and Jan. 1.

However, the Dempze Cranberry Co. has recently patented three varieties: Sundance, Ruby Star and the Big Red. They are naturally sweet and dry well to become cranraisins. The berries grown here will end up in an Ocean Spray bottle or package.

Wading in berries

The best part of visiting a cranberry marsh during harvest? Putting on a pair of rubber waders and walking out into the midst of that sea of red. Don't move too fast, because the vines are underwater. It takes a minute to get a feel for it under your feet.

Rooted in Red, the entertainment side of Dempze Cranberry, has waders in all sizes, allowing kids and adults to enjoy the autumn fun. However, the only time you can do it this year is the Cranberry Harvest Experience on the weekend of Oct. 14-16. Reservations are required (\$75, 715-544-7438 or rootedinred.co).

More Wisconsin cranberry tours

Lake Nokomis Cranberries: Eagle River; 715-479-6546; lakenokomiscranberries.com.

Manitowish Waters Cranberry Marsh Tours: manitowishwaters.org.

Splash of Red Cranberry Tours: Pittsville; 715-884-6412 or meisslin@pittsville.k12.wi.us (<mailto:meisslin@pittsville.k12.wi.us>).

Wetherby Cranberry Co.: Warrens; 608-378-4813; freshcranberries.com.

Cranberry Highway

Spend a leisurely afternoon exploring the Cranberry Highway, a 50-mile drive between Wisconsin Rapids and Warrens along Hwys. 173 and 54. Stop in Warrens to explore the **Wisconsin Cranberry Discovery Center** (608-378-4878; discovercranberries.com).



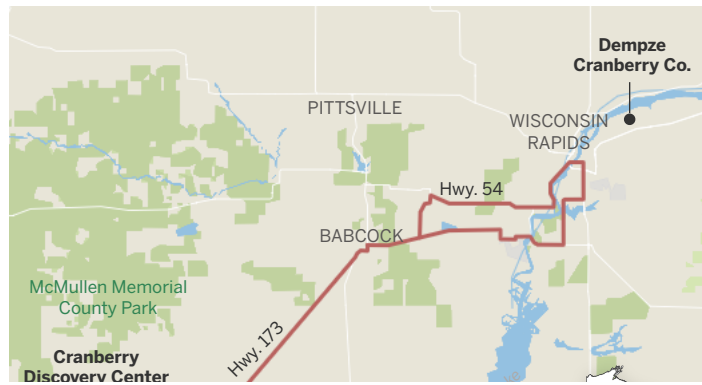
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The cranberry marshes at Dempze Cranberry Company are flooded with water in the fall to aid in the harvest.



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ROOTED IN RED

Tourists can wade in cranberry marshes during the Cranberry Harvest Experience (Oct. 14-16).



A road trip through cranberry country from mid-June to mid-July, when the vines are in bloom, is also a colorful getaway. That's when thousands of beehives populate the marshes and millions of pollinators do their thing.

For more information and recipes with fresh cranberries, visit wiscran.org (<http://wiscran.org>).

Diana Lambdin Meyer is a Kansas City-based travel writer.
