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The Cranberry Network working toward a great Wisconsin cranberry season

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While the Wisconsin fresh cranberry crop is running late this year, the timing is good for the marketplace and the 2013 deal holds a great promise, according to Bob Wilson, managing member of The Cranberry Network LLC, headquartered in Wisconsin Rapids, WI.

Overall, "I am optimistic we will have a great year," he said.

The Cranberry Network is the marketing agency for Habelman Bros. Co., a leading grower-shipper based in Tomah, WI.

On Sept. 4, Wilson told The Produce News, "We have had another kind of interesting season in terms of being slow out of the gate. We were late from the beginning and we are still late, which is where we stand today. We have had a great bloom and fruit set. As hot as it has been for the last few weeks, the length and breadth of good growing days is not what we wanted for an ideal season in general for cranberries."

Wilson noted, "What is best for the crop in general" - which primarily goes to processors - "is not necessarily the best for the fresh crop. We still are looking for the fruit to size. The forecast is for warm temperatures for the foreseeable future and hopefully we won't get sustained low temperatures at night.

"Summing it up for today, there is a great berry count. There is plenty of quantity. The fruit is undersized and under-ripened. We hope the fruit will still size."

In recent years, the Wisconsin cranberry harvest has begun in mid-September.

“At Habelman’s, their position is that they are postponing harvest by one week,” which means starting to harvest about Sept. 23. Wilson said this strategy “is just fine” because the 2013 Thanksgiving holidays of Canada (Oct. 14) and the U.S. (Nov. 28) are both relatively late. This timing is also good to suit overseas demand.

This cranberry crop is expected to have “great keeping quality because when the berries are slightly undersized, they tend to hold very well; and that is our rough prediction for Wisconsin cranberries.”

In early September, “you hope to be at the point where the berries are close to being grown. We are not quite there yet. If the berries are nice and sized, you hope the weather starts to get cool at night. That is the signal for the cranberry vine to start shutting down. In that cycle, the color starts to flow into the fruit.”

He added that sunshine also adds to cranberry color “but the true pigmentation comes as the vine shuts down with cold weather. We look for cold weather at night to really color up the fruit in the last three or four weeks of the season.”

Regarding cranberry markets this fall, he said, “We are playing it ‘steady as she goes.’ I don’t see anything out there too crazy in terms of pricing. We have had a reputation here over the last number of years since Habelman’s became independent that they are the go-to guys for quality and service.”

Habelman’s marketing program is “not real fancy with merchandising deals or anything like that. The focus is on servicing individual accounts’ targeted needs with a focus on handling our fruit in such a way that it promotes longevity through a pack-to-order program to assure our customers receive product when they want it most.”

The Cranberry Network and Habelman’s also work to assure customers receive prime-quality cranberries in December.

“That has been a cornerstone since Habelman’s became independent in 2008,” he said. “We look at the data and it says consumers purchase fresh cranberries 90 percent more in November and December. The peak availability is prior to that by a month or so. The secret is to bridge the gap between availability and demand peaks.”

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