

HOME & COUNTRY



Cranberries: Crimson Jewels of Bala

Located in Bala, the Johnstons' productive cranberry marsh stands out at harvest like a blazing crimson jewel in the lush Muskoka landscape. You might almost wonder if the Johnston family had cranberry juice coursing through their veins after 40 years of running the marsh, one of Ontario's two commercial bogs.

Orville Johnston first got interested in the commercial possibilities of this native North American fruit in the early 1950s. Cranberries had long grown wild in the Muskoka region; the loamy soil was suitably acidic and proximity to water was just right. So, with his brother Melville, he methodically made plans, learning as he progressed, until finally both were ready to get down to the business of raising cranberries.

The Johnston brothers began draining their marshland, stripping off surface vegetation and creating dykes to form separate beds. Raised roadways were created and an irrigation system was established. Then, when the vines went in, it took them several seasons to reach bearing age... and then, at last, the Johnston brothers were in business.

All of this may seem like distant history to the Johnston family now. Today, the thriving Bala operation is still run by two Johnston brothers. Orville's two sons, Blake and Murray, now own and operate the 20-acre marsh.



Every fall, Murray Johnston and his brother Blake harvest roughly 300,000 pounds of luscious red cranberries from their 20-acre marsh in Bala, Ontario.

Photo courtesy of Foodland Ontario.

When asked about the inevitability of a career in cranberries, Murray smiles: "It wasn't that we were ever expected to carry on with the business... But my brother and I saw the potential as it was

then, in the late seventies, and took it as a personal challenge. And, you know, it gives you real satisfaction to be involved in realizing a family dream."

Between them Blake and Murray oversee an annual production of roughly 300,000 pounds of cranberries per season. Ask any Johnston about the "season" and you'll immediately be set straight: cranberry growing is a year-round enterprise. The harvest itself may only encompass a brief four weeks around Thanksgiving, but production takes the full course of a year.

Through the fallow winter months ditches are cleaned, beds sanded and equipment repaired. In spring there's pruning and weeding, and then, as summer sets in, pollination. The Johnstons' have hives of honey bees brought in to assist the local wild pollinators. Mowing and ditch maintenance are ongoing processes, and irrigation must be managed as an antidote to drought and as protection against unseasonal frost.

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