

AGRICULTURE - - Cranberries

Jim Thomas

Manager, Old Western Peat Plant  
1921 Westminster Highway, Richmond

Interviewed: February 5, 1973.

In 1954 three - Fred Shaw, Norman Holmes and Jim Thomas came from Eastern U.S. and talked to growers, one man had 4 - 5 acres on his lawn, Westminster Highway, decided cranberries could be grown commercially here . . . made deal with Mr. Carncross, Western Peat re 50-50 proposition when production into company stage . . . 3 were neighbors at Carver, Mass., in business Norman Holmes in box business affected on change from wooden to cardboard usage . . . wanted to expand in Mass. but no land left so came looking for land . . . peat company for something to do with depleted land other than blueberries.

Cranberry Experimental Station, Wareham, Mass. gave them Carncross' name . . . their Dr. Fred Chandler had visited Richmond and saw cranberries.

Jim Thomas came one year ahead and planted 20 acres cranberries . . . cleared land because old method left trees . . . had to stump it, take stumps away, engineer roads, drainage . . . when peat off by "scratch method" land much easier to prepare.

Some bog at area in 1948 . . . last 2-3 years planted 75-90 acres a year and now have 360 acres of cranberries on a section of land on north side of Westminster Highway 1½ miles in.

Problem: Fertilizer . . . commercial chemical . . . experiment to find best aided by Department of Agriculture . . . used 215:15 formula . . . as land gets older expect use more nitrogen . . .

phosphorus and potash are equal . . . now use 100 lbs. to acre (really a light application) . . . using too much nitrogen causes overgrowth.

Problem of frost: install sprinkler system, expensive but eliminates frost . . . using sprinkler 30 EBW Rainbird head . . . 10 of them to the acre for the 360 acre farm . . . so 3600 sprinklers turn on any night which drops to 32° . . . Honeywell system adaption used to ring alarm set for 33° . . . bog varies 12° - 14° difference on areas . . . have 15 thermometers scattered around and choose coldest temperature . . . during critical time of frost have two men on duty to staff the pumps . . . problem of little fish from reservoir getting into sprinkler heads and plugging holes . . . trouble comes at farthest head at ends of line.

More water than in reservoir . . . 8 to 10 miles of canal 18 feet wide holds more water . . . hold canal water 4 feet higher than in municipal ditches . . . if any higher it seeps into surrounding area . . . work closely with Dikes and Drainage Department and at high tide they allow (Fraser River) water to come into ditch water is being taken from . . . at low tide it goes away again . . . volume of water coming down the river keeps sea water out . . . tested and found more salt in Vancouver drinking water than in Fraser River water . . . ideal way if Western Peat had own area to river . . . good drainage . . . in frost protection one inch of water is dumped on ground every month of the year (has records) as bog is colder than surrounding land . . . keep frost crew on til April 15 . . . water stays in pot holes and kills developing buds when temperature drops.

Harvesting: still have half dozen machines to fix to be ready . . . have 30 machines . . . a combing type machine run by 3 h.p.

Clinton engine . . . operators are all East Indian women from New Westminster . . . they also pick blueberries . . . good workers, work as individuals . . . weeding done by Chinese, contract . . . 15 to 30 come . . . as cranberries vine over, weeding problem lessens . . . eventually get East Indian especially with new minimum wage law.

Employ 10 steady employees on drainage, road building, repairing machinery, buildings, carpentry , . . 4 East Indian boys also permanent.

Realized needed earlier variety of cranberry when first came than commonly used MacFarlane variety . . . due to Canadian thanksgiving occurring around Oct. 10, brought 22 different earlier varieties . . . planted a handful of each next to No. 9 road and kept records . . . chose No. 8 type eventually named Bergman . . . from handful of vines now have 255 acres cranberries one month earlier.

Start picking September 8 at earliest . . . susceptible to fungus using sprays to clean up . . . gives one month longer before November rains . . . a good cranberry is dry harvested . . . so have earlier season and fresh berry.

Sell all fruit through Ocean Spray, a true co-op owned by cranberry growers . . . control 80-85% of all cranberries grown in North America.

In Canada cranberries also grown: Kentville, N.S. but climate not good but Ian Hall creating interest . . . and Drummondville, Quebec . . . Richmond growing area typical of Western U.S. and Mass. area.

Helicopter use in airlifting (Okanagan Helicopters) harvesting started 6 years ago . . . because of peat, can't put wheels on cranberry field . . . harvesting machines pick in sacks . . . slide sack onto bog . . . men dump sacks into totes 3' x 4' x 4' plywood

having attachment to hook to helicopter . . . ready 25 totes . . .  
helicopter airlifts to hard land (sawdust roads) where forklifted  
to trucks.

Average: one tote (1000 pounds gross or 800-900 lbs. berries  
is moved in 1 - 1½ minutes . . . costs 1/2 cent a pound - some  
transported 1/2 mile . . . answer to protecting cranberry carpet from  
wheels or walking. Ecology.

Other cranberry growers use helicopters now:

Sidaway Road, 3 or 4 individual.  
Northern Peat  
Lulu Farms, about 160 acre farms.  
Norman Holmes formed Columbia company (newest)

Plants take 3-4 years to get into production . . . Western Peat  
latest planting was 1968 so expect top production 1974-6.

1971 was peak growing year - nearly 5 million pounds. Last year  
crop was 100,000 barrels (1 barrel = 100 lbs.)

To aerial spray insecticides, fungicides and fertilizer used bi-  
planes at Langley at first . . . now Con Air planes at Abbotsford.

Insect problem: strawberry root weevil underground - found  
flooding killed. Peat soil filters insecticides out of water so  
doesn't reach fruit root weevil . . . dig down to root to find.

Original agreement of Thomas, etc. with Carncross at Western Peat  
was a 50% deal to grow cranberries . . . when Carncross sold out two  
Mass. growers formed the Big Red Cranberry Company 1960-1968 . . .  
then sold shares to Western Peat and became employee-managers . . .  
new American owners wouldn't expand until they owned all shares.

Thomas, Shaw and Holmes "dug it out of the bush" to launch  
cranberry production on bog . . . aim: to average 50,000 barrels  
production.

Mr. Jim Thomas

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Other Western Peat Moss Ltd.

Head Office - 310 - 2609 Granville St.

Delta plant - 687 No. 7 Road

A and D plant - Ladner (Atkinson and Deerboro)

Moss Spur, Winnipeg; also Quebec, New Brunswick and Minnesota

Nice Sunny day . . . red glow of cranberries on bog . . . mountains  
snow covered in background.

Thinks it is largest cranberry bog in one area in North America.

Dellis Cleland