

Self-Guided Driving Tour of Warrens Area Cranberry Marshes

Did you know Wisconsin is the leading producer of cranberries in the world? More than half of the world's supply of cranberries are grown on 250 Wisconsin family farms. Cranberries are Wisconsin's No. 1 fruit crop, generating \$1 billion in economic revenue and 4,000 jobs.

Native to the marshlands of central and northern Wisconsin, Native Americans harvested wild cranberries for centuries. Commercial cranberry production in Wisconsin began in the 1850s.

Today cranberries are grown in 20 of Wisconsin's 72 counties, but the largest concentration of growers is in the Tomah/Warrens/Wisconsin Rapids area.

The most exciting time of the year in Cranberry Country is harvest season, which typically begins in mid-September and runs through October.

Contrary to what most people believe, cranberries do not grow in water. Cranberry beds are flooded at harvest because cranberries contain four tiny air pockets and will float. Harvesting methods vary depending on whether the crop will be sold as fresh fruit or turned into processed products like juice, sauce and dried cranberries.

Another beautiful time to visit is when the cranberry vines are in bloom, which – depending on Mother Nature – happens from late June into early July. A great opportunity to see the tiny pink blossoms up close is on Cranberry Blossom Day. The event is hosted annually by Wetherby Cranberry Company on the last Saturday of June.

The Wetherby marsh also hosts marsh tours during the annual Warrens Harvest Day Celebration on the first Saturday of October. Along with a marsh tour, visitors can pull on hip boots and have their photo taken standing among floating cranberries. For details on those two events, visit their website at www.freshcranberries.com.

But you can tour Cranberry Country any time you're visiting the area. We suggest starting – or ending – your tour at the Wisconsin Cranberry Discovery Center in downtown Warrens.

Housed in a historic cranberry warehouse building, the Cranberry Discovery Center features an interactive exhibit hall, gift shop offering Wisconsin-made cranberry products and old-fashioned ice cream parlor serving cranberry ice cream. The Center's hours vary by season, so check their website at www.discovercranberries.com for current hours.

Our suggested tour route is 22.5 miles, so you'll want to allow about one hour to see all the sights. The route will take you past two dozen cranberry marshes, but not all are visible from the road. We've listed information for those marshes that have roadside signs to help you pinpoint your location.

Starting from the Cranberry Discovery Center, travel across the train tracks on Main Street and turn right onto County Hwy EW. As you leave Warrens, you'll see the sign for Gebhardt Cranberry Marsh/Whiskey Creek Cranberry on your right. This marsh was started in 1968, making it one of the newer marshes you'll see on the tour. Many of the marshes are 100 years old or older.

You'll travel about 2 miles down EW before you will see the sign on the right for the Russell Rezin & Son Cranberry Marsh, which celebrated its centennial in 1918.

As you pass by the cranberry reservoirs or ponds bordering the road, look for bald eagles, trumpeter swans, loons and other waterfowl. Cranberry marshes also provide habitat for sandhill cranes, whitetail deer, muskrats, otters, coyotes, wolves and other wildlife. Past the ponds you'll find more cranberry beds belonging to the Rezin marsh along both sides of the road.

Many cranberry marshes in our area are multi-generation operations. We have families who have been growing cranberries for five, six and even seven generations, including family members of the James Potter Cranberry Marsh, which is the next marsh on your right.

Ahead on the left is Potter Cranberry Company. Established in 1871 and owned by the Potter family since 1912, the marsh is one of the oldest in the Warrens area.

Continuing on take a right on to Auger Road to see Wetherby Cranberry Company. This marsh is owned by the Van Wychen family, who produce their own cranberry wine and sell fresh cranberries in season. Third-generation cranberry grower Nodji Van Wychen also offers tours by appointment for a fee.

When departing from Wetherby Cranberry, turn right on Hwy EW and then left on Augusta Road. Here you can get a close-up view of the Potter Cranberry Company marsh. On the right are sections that are being renovated. The 12 original beds are being converted into two 15-acre beds. The oldest beds on the left were planted in 1928 and are still producing cranberries 90 years later.

Stay on Augusta Road until it intersects with Crampton Road where Hancock Brothers has a sphagnum moss processing facility. Wisconsin is the only state in the U.S. to commercially harvest sphagnum moss. You may see sphagnum moss spread out on the sand to dry before it is packaged and sold to garden centers and plant nurseries. The long-fibered moss holds 20 times its weight in water, making it invaluable for keeping nursery stock alive in shipment.

At the intersection of Crampton and Beltz Road is a sign for Beltz Cranberry Company owned by the Steve and Betty Gebhardt family. Some of the Ocean Spray commercials featuring the two comical cranberry growers were filmed on the Gebhardt marsh.

Continue east on Crampton Road and on the left you'll see a sign for Gebhardt LLC, also owned by the Gebhardt family. Before being planted to cranberries in the 1990s, a mint farm operated in this area. The peppermint oil was extracted for use in flavoring candies, toothpaste and other products.

Crampton Road intersects with county Hwy HH. The marsh sign is a few yards to the right, but directly in front of you is QRS&M Cranberry Company. This cranberry marsh was started in 1877. Prior to that the sawmill community of Chaplin was located on this property.

Turn left on to Hwy HH. As you head west on HH, you will see a sign on the right for Farmland Management's Jackson-Meadow Valley Marsh. Old-timers still call this the Case Marsh. Russel Case purchased government land in 1876 that had wild cranberries growing on it. The marsh stayed in the Case family until the death of Robert "Bob" Case – Russel's grandson – in 1975.

Bob Case was an inventor and built one of the first mechanized cranberry pickers. For a time, Bob had his workshop in Union Cranberry Company warehouse that now houses the Wisconsin Cranberry Discovery Center. One of Bob's early raking machines is on display in the museum.

The next sign you'll see – also on the right – is for Scott Cranberry's East Marsh. Also started in the 1870s, the marsh was purchased in 1918 by Judge John Stevens and settled on by his daughter and son-in-law Genevieve and Archibald Scott in 1921. The marsh has been in continuous operation by members of the Stevens/Scott family since that time and is currently a fifth-generation family farm.

One mile further east on HH is JR Nemitz Cranberry Company, which has beds located on both sides of the road. The Nemitz family diversified their farm in 2014 by planting aronia which – like cranberries – are native to North America. Aronia berries are small, dark purple berries that have become popular among health-conscious consumers. The family has 24,000 bushes on 20 acres, which are harvested in late August.

Two more miles down HH is Walworth Cranberry LLC. The Walworth, Nemitz and Wetherby marshes were all part of the Union Cranberry Company at one time. When the owner retired, he offered his three marsh managers the opportunity to buy the properties they managed. Charles Walworth and his son Dale purchased the Central Marsh, as it had been known, in 1973.

Turn left on to Hwy O and travel three miles – passing by additional cranberry marshes – back to the village of Warrens and the start of your tour.

Thank you for visiting Warrens. For information on other attractions and events, including the Warrens Cranberry Festival – always held the last full weekend of September – see the Visit Warrens website.

