

## Cook With Fresh Cranberries

With Thanksgiving fast approaching, this is a good time to learn about the real all-American fruit – the cranberry. Cranberries are small, round, tart berries with a tangy flavor. Cranberries are often added to recipes or made into other products rather than eaten alone.

All cranberry products provide similar health benefits and are easy to incorporate into the diet. Cranberries are high in nutrients and antioxidants. Antioxidants are molecules that can help your body fight off harmful free radicals that can protect against heart disease, cancer, and other diseases. Cranberries provide vitamin C, dietary fiber, manganese, and phytonutrients.

The peak harvest season for fresh cranberries is October through early January. They are sold in a 12-ounce bag equal to about 3 cups of whole berries. Sometimes, fresh cranberries can be found in the freezer section. Cranberries are available in various forms, including juice, sauce, and dried.

The coloring may vary from light to dark red, and the berry size may differ. Choose shiny, plump, and firm cranberries. Remove any berries that are soft or shriveled. A fresh berry will “bounce” when dropped, so try it!

When purchasing fresh cranberries, keep them in the original plastic bag or another airtight sealed bag or container. Refrigerate for up to 2 months in the crisper drawer. Removing brown, soft, or shriveled berries will help them store longer.

Fresh cranberries freeze well, with very little loss of their texture or taste. Fresh cranberries can be frozen in the original bag for a short time. For longer storage, place whole or sliced cranberries in a labeled container or freezer bag for up to one year.

Rinse fresh or frozen cranberries before use and throw out any that are shriveled or bruised. Frozen cranberries do not need to be thawed before adding them to a recipe; just rinse and add.

Fresh cranberries contain four air pockets, so they float. Many baked good recipes cut or chop the berries to avoid them floating to the top of the batter while the recipe bakes.

Cooking directions instruct that the cranberries be heated just until they pop. The air is being removed from the air pockets. It is important that you don't overcook them, or they will turn to mush and become bitter.

Cranberries add zingy flavor to desserts and help thicken pie and cobbler fillings. One favorite dessert recipe is Cranberry Cake with Warm Butter Cream Sauce. It's pretty on a plate, then spoon that warm butter sauce over the top, and you're in heaven! When cranberries aren't available, I use raspberries.

Winter and fall vegetables pair particularly well with fresh cranberries. A handful of fresh cranberries roasted and tossed in with a vegetable medley can provide a tart taste similar to a squeeze of lemon juice to bring a tart burst to every bite. I came across a recipe for roasted cranberries with orange juice, honey, and spices that looked phenomenal. It can be used as a side dish or sauce.

Sliced, raw, fresh cranberries also add a tangy addition to salads and grain bowls, and blended gives salad dressings a sour, fruity boost. Adding cranberries will brighten dishes, open new taste experiences, and improve health. Cranberries add a hot pink/deep red color to your table.

Many of us only think about cranberries when it's time to eat our Thanksgiving meal. There's no need to limit cooking with cranberries to just a few short months when you know how to select, store, and use them to kick up the flavors of everyday recipes. These scarlet gems add color and sparkle to a range of sweet and savory dishes throughout the year.