



## A Bountiful Thanksgiving Harvest

Organic Cranberry Producer Brings Fruit to the Family Table

*Above: (L to R) John Stauner, Owner of James Lake Farms, inspects the cranberry harvest during packing with Michael Stinebrink, NRCS District Conservationist.*

Deep in the heart of cranberry country, John Stauner and his wife, Nora, own and operate James Lake Farms, an organic cranberry marsh in Oneida County, Wis. The Stauner’s harvest contributes to the state being the nation’s leading producer of cranberries, producing more than 60 percent of the country’s crop. John grew up in Marshfield knowing there were cranberry farms in northern Wis., but he didn’t know much else about them. “I started off thinking cranberries grew in water,” explained John. Contrary to popular belief, cranberries do not grow in water, but on low running vines in sandy bogs and marshes, which are flooded with water to aid in harvesting. Cranberries contain a pocket of air and berries float to the surface to be picked up by harvesting equipment.

With a degree in natural resources and water chemistry, John wanted to learn more about the local fruit. “I took a job working for a consulting lab partnering with cranberry marshes to do integrated pest management, soil and tissue analysis work,” said John. His employer group established Northland Cranberries. John became Vice President of Operations and gained knowledge of the industry through his 20-year career with the company. John adds, “Northland was the largest grower in the world at one point.” In 2000, an oversupply of cranberries resulted in the company being sold into pieces. “In 2006, my wife and I had an opportunity to buy a very small piece of that puzzle, and thus started James Lake Farms and this cranberry marsh,” said John.

The James Lake Farms marsh has 65 acres of cranberries and 1,540 acres of support land on the property. Truly a family business, John and Nora’s son, Ben Riker, a National Guard Veteran, came home after deployment in 2010, and decided to join the family business, taking on a manager role. John and Nora employ 6 full time staff and 30 seasonal employees during harvest to effectively run their business.

John had experience growing organically and he had much interest in transitioning his own property. “We wrote a business plan and decided on our value-added product, organic fresh fruit; we knew transitioning to organic was right for us,” said John. Stauner adds, “We knew organics would help us make this small operation economically viable and I also like the challenge of growing organically.” The Stauners were so enthusiastic about transitioning to organic, they started the transition the year before they finalized purchasing the property and were certified in 2007. “Ten years later, we are continuing to grow something that is good for people and the environment in which we are growing it. That is the most satisfying aspect of what we do,” added John.

Once the farm was certified organic, the next hurdle was upgrading the irrigation lines original to the marsh. “Infrastructure wise, we have done a lot to the property since we purchased it,” said John. “This marsh was the first in Wisconsin to have a solid set irrigation system in the 1950s; the same irrigation system was here when we purchased the marsh in 2006; it



*Left: James Lake Farms employees harvest cranberries from a ripe bed. Right: Employees inspect berries during packing.*

was in serious need of rehabilitation,” said John. The Stauners learned, through the Wis. State Cranberry Growers Association (WSCGA), about the one-on-one personalized advice and investments to operations and local communities the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) provides.

John worked with Michael Stinebrink, then an NRCS Resource Conservationist, stationed in the WSCGA’s office, in Wisconsin Rapids, as part of a cooperative agreement between NRCS and WSCGA. In 2007, Stinebrink completed an assessment of the irrigation system and developed an irrigation water management plan, which included recommended irrigation runtimes to meet crop water needs. Pest management and nutrient management were also implemented, with financial assistance provided through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the WSCGA–NRCS cooperative agreement. “All cranberry growers are implementing some form of nutrient, pest and irrigation water management,” said Stinebrink. “Our role is to apply the best science, in accordance with NRCS technical standards, to influence that management to achieve natural resource objectives, such as water quality and water conservation.”

John returned to NRCS to complete upgrades to the irrigation system, using technical and financial assistance through EQIP. From 2008–2011, modern, high-efficiency sprinkler systems, with 3 lateral lines and sprinkler spacing of 44-by-40 ft were installed to replace the original, 2-line irrigation systems, with sprinkler spacing of approximately 66-by-60 ft. Additionally, more than 6,800 feet of buried, high-density polyethylene, irrigation pipeline was installed to replace the original, leaky and undersized, above-ground, aluminum mainline. “The combination of these conservation practices, coupled with the irrigation water management plan, allows for improved plant health. Irrigation applied to meet crop moisture needs and for frost protection is more evenly distributed across the beds, while also reducing water and energy consumption,” said Stinebrink, now the NRCS District Conservationist in Rhineland. “Everything we’ve made has gone back into the marsh to improve it and make it better; the cost sharing through EQIP helped immensely,” said John. “The upgraded systems, with

the help of NRCS, save us a lot of water usage. It also enables us to get more uniformity on the cranberry bed when we do irrigate.”

Transitioning to organic has allowed the farm to step outside the mainstream supply and demand curve by offering a value-added product. “There is definitely a great market for organic cranberries; organics has helped us make our business viable,” said John. Farming organically is not without its challenges. “Our biggest challenge is weed control. We use mechanical clipping almost weekly to reduce the competition for the growing cranberry vines,” explained John. The Stauners also rely on new technology, such as mating disruption, and some old techniques, such as flooding for insect control in the spring, to keep their marsh thriving. Trying new technologies on a smaller scale has enabled John to gain experience and find out what works, transitioning proven technologies to standard practices. “We use tested natural products like blood meal, composted manures, fish emulsions and naturally mined minerals for fertility. We rely on the biology of our healthy soil to break down these natural fertilizers. There’s a science and art to cranberry farming as well,” added John. To the Stauners, conservation means working with Mother Nature. They view growing their crop as managing an ecosystem, working with it for production.

The Stauners grow a product that people appreciate and find value in. They also value their land that provides the bountiful harvest each year. John explains, “We’re growing something people really appreciate and we also see the value in the land. We’ve had nesting loons on the lake since 2009. It’s very satisfying to see so much more biodiversity on the property. We now see a plethora of species and insects.” John also sees diversity in pollinators and species, including three different species of native bumble bees, other beneficial pollinators, spiders, snails, and a variety of animals. The Stauners rely on native pollinators and also use a combination of rented honey bees and purchased commercial bumble bee hives to help with pollination. “We have a pretty good natural native pollinator base; this is one of the main benefits of farming organically; we conserve the pollinators intentionally; we don’t use the harsh chemistry that combats them; you do not want pollination to be a limiting factor in production,” explains John.



James Lake Farms packages under their own brand and many other organic brand labels sold in the Midwest. When cranberries are harvested, they come off the field wet and dirty. Berries are sorted and the chaff, leaves and stems are removed. They are also cleaned, dried and stored in bins for packaging. “When we do a pick and pack operation, we normally have fresh berries on the truck in 24–48 hours to be delivered,” said John.

John and Nora also participated in the NRCS forestry program, through EQIP, enrolling over 600 acres of wooded support land. “We worked with an NRCS Technical Service Provider to write a Forestry Management Plan for our support land acres. Most had never been assessed or harvested,” explained John. The plan allowed for restoration and cutting. John adds, “We have very good white birch genetics, nice and straight; we did some shelter wood cutting and wanted to get regeneration of white birch going.” The plan allowed for leaving a mature tree every 50 feet to seed and regenerate into a new white birch stand.

The Stauner’s plan is to keep investing in the marsh and continue to make improvements in the vines, equipment, facilities and irrigation to add value and save resources. John recently purchased a 124-acre cranberry marsh on the other side of town. He is currently transitioning that property to organic production, to be certified in 2018. John explains, “We’re transitioning the newly acquired marsh to organic and we have an irrigation system there also needing help. In the near future, we will be contacting our local NRCS office again, to work together. We’re also planning a new packing facility.”

John plans to continue his thriving business and hopes for future generations of cranberry growers in the Stauner family. “I didn’t grow up in cranberries and am a first generation grower. We have three grandchildren all growing up here on the property, learning about cranberries; that’s a very satisfying feeling and very rewarding. John explains, “We love to grow cranberries, and having the family here and giving them that lifestyle, that’s what I’m most proud of.” The Stauners will continue to grow organic cranberries for families to enjoy during the holidays and year-round.



*James Lake Farms entrance with regenerating white birch acres enrolled in the NRCS forestry program behind the sign.*



*Berries during harvest.*



*Cranberry beds after harvest.*



*Michael Stinebrink, NRCS District Conservationist, checks irrigation pipeline installed through EQIP financial assistance.*