

# CREAM OF THE CROP



PHOTOS BY CONRAD SCHMIDT/THE STAR-LEDGER

Ahmad Amin, left, Don Miller, foreground, and Dave Gilligan waded into the bog to harvest the immature cranberries, used to make white juice, which doesn't stain.

## Early cranberry harvest is sweet

### Demand for white juice gives growers a welcome lift

BY ALEXANDER LANE  
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

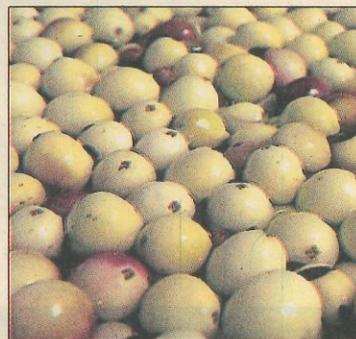
It's been a tough year to be a New Jersey cranberry grower. There were lawsuits, languishing prices and a large loss of land.

But lately, that's all faded to the background for growers like Stephen and Abbott Lee.

"This is the fun part," said Stephen Lee III, 57.

Wearing waders, baseball caps and big grins, the Lee brothers last week lifted the wooden gates separating their fields in Chatsworth from the swamps and reservoirs surrounding them.

The pure, dark water of the Pine Barrens poured in like maple syrup filling the crevices of a giant waffle. One bog at a time, workers floated in on machines, gently plucked the buoyant berries from their vines and corralled them in a corner, where they could be vacuumed up and trucked off to the Ocean Spray plant.



The berries are picked before the crimson color develops.

Normally the harvest takes place in late October, when the cranberries have turned a deep crimson. This early round comes courtesy of immature white cranberries, hauled in to feed the growing market for white cranberry juice — a bright spot in an otherwise troubled industry.

White cranberry juice, introduced nationally last year by

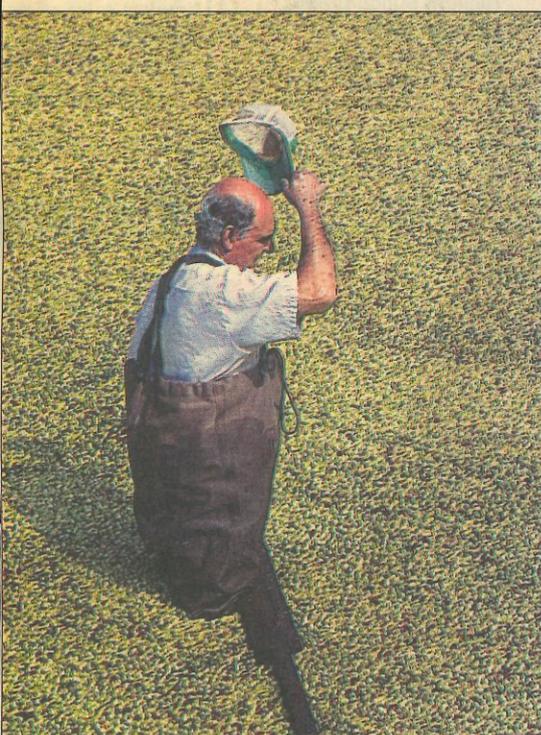
Ocean Spray — the agricultural marketing cooperative to which the Lees and most of New Jersey's other cranberry growers belong — is being marketed to young families who like the health benefits of cranberry juice but are wary of scarlet stains on their furniture.

"It's been a fast-growing, very successful product introduction," said Ocean Spray spokesman Chris Phillips, adding that revenues from white juice have grown to \$100 million.

Growers needed some good news.

The price-per-barrel for cranberries crashed from \$61.80 in 1996 to \$10.90 in 1999, and it has yet to recover. The decline was caused by a glut of cranberries that flooded the market after unusually productive crops in 1999 and 2000.

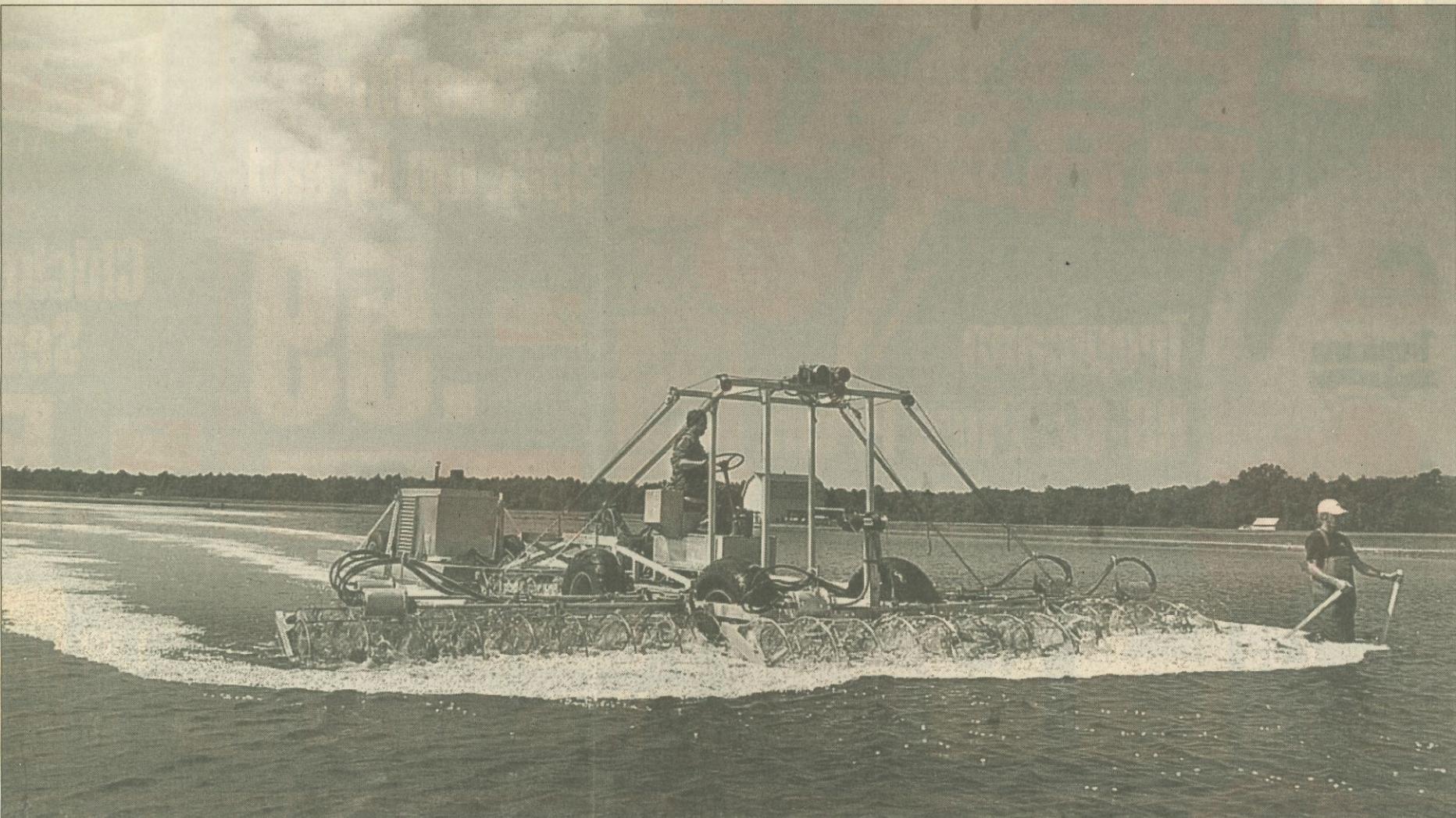
Growers had hoped to see prices climb back to \$40 a barrel for the 2003 crop, but it seems unlikely [See **CRANBERRIES**, Page 25]



Amin works in the late-summer sun. Traditionally, the berries are harvested at the end of October.

# "This is the fun part."

STEPHEN LEE III, CRANBERRY FARMER



PHOTOS BY CONRAD SCHMIDT/THE STAR-LEDGER

Stephen Lee III, driving, works with Herb Armstrong to harvest cranberries on the Lee family farm in Chatsworth. Lee's great-great-grandfather started digging out bogs in Chatsworth by hand in 1868. "Apparently he knew what he was doing," Stephen Lee said. "The old bogs are always in the right place."

## CRANBERRIES

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### Early harvest is sweet

they'll get that high, Abbott Lee said.

Another blow struck the sector when one of the state's largest and most politically influential growers, J. Garfield DeMarco, sold his 800 acres of bogs to an environmental group this year, undermining this cranberry region's vitality and costing the cooperative in various ways, growers said.

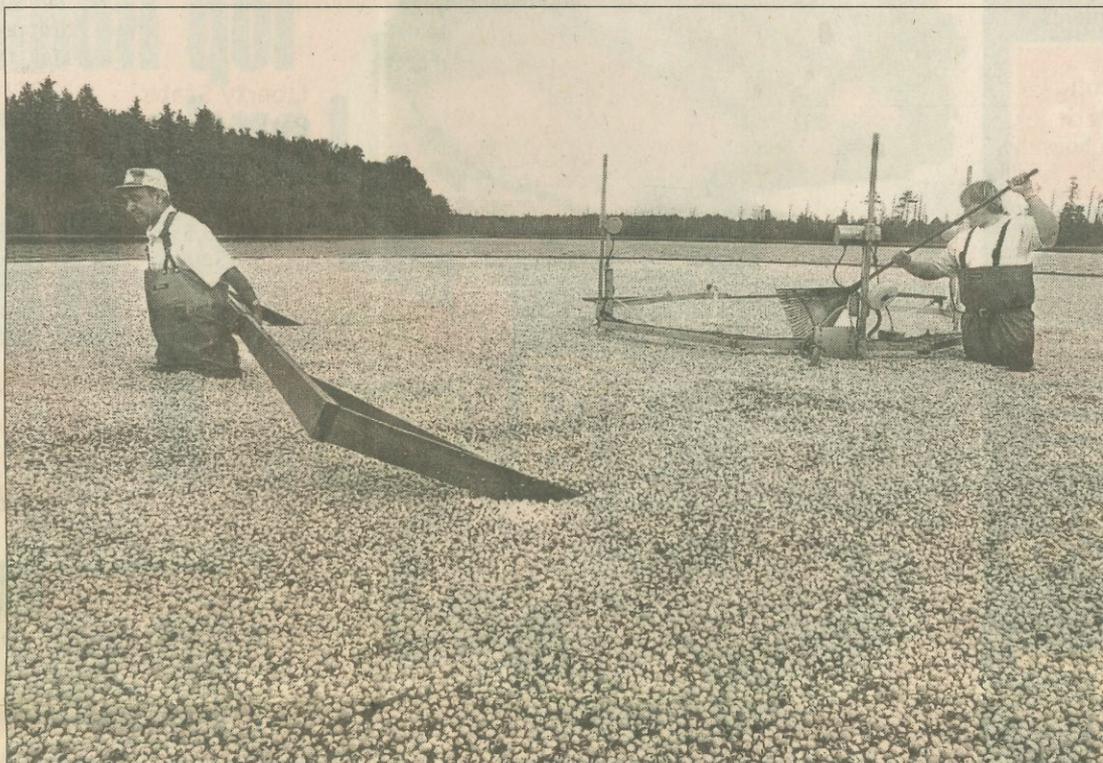
#### HOMEGROWN IS BEST

The loss of such a major local producer means more fruit from out of state will have to be trucked in to the Ocean Spray plant in Bordentown City, which manufactures juice and sauce for the entire Northeast. And products like fertilizer and pesticides could become more difficult to find locally, growers said.

"Any fruit grown in New Jersey is a win for the co-op, so the co-op loses in this," Lee said. "It's not good for those of us who remain committed to a lifetime of growing cranberries."

DeMarco is also suing Ocean Spray in an attempt to force the board of directors to consider merging or selling the company. Most of his charges were dismissed, but his case is still alive in the courts of Delaware, where the company is based.

On another front, the Sierra Club is suing the State of New Jersey to try to do away with a new state permit that allows cranberry growers to expand by 50 acres, at a rate of 10 acres a year for five years. Environmentalists have long contended cranberry farming poisons



Amin, left, and Don Miller gather cranberries in a bog in Chatsworth to be loaded onto trucks and shipped to the Ocean Spray plant in Bordentown City, which makes juice and sauce for the entire Northeast.

wetlands and imposes a harmful industrial monoculture on sections of the Pine Barrens that once brimmed with biological diversity. The state Supreme Court heard arguments in the case on Monday.

But all the marketing, bickering and litigating took a back seat to flooding and picking on the Lee brothers' farm last week.

Their great-great-grandfather started digging out bogs in Chatsworth by hand in 1868, when cranberry farming took root in the Pine Barrens. Wild cranberries had long grown in the area, but a thriving industry was born when the early innovators figured out the advantages of periodically flooding the bog.

In cold weather, water from surrounding streams, swamps and reservoirs keeps the vines at 32 degrees, a temperature at which they can live. During the harvest, the berries bob to the top of the water, making for easy picking and collecting.

"Apparently he knew what he was doing," Stephen Lee said of his great-great-grandfather, an engineer from Ireland. "The old bogs are always in the right place."

#### INNOVATIVE TECHNIQUES

New Jersey's 45 cranberry growers depend on the innovation of their ancestors, and themselves. The Lees and other growers routinely build their own new gear, constantly striving for more speed

and a gentler touch on the vines.

Abbott Lee, 53, the more gadget-minded of the two, designed the massive machine that vacuums berries from the bog and sends them up a stairway of small grates that strain out stems, leaves, turtles and the like.

It's innovation born of desperation.

"The cranberry industry is so small that you have to make your own equipment," Stephen Lee said. "We can't exactly call John Deere and say I need a new bog-side cleaner."

In 1995, the Lees developed a floating picking machine — something like a giant version of an old-fashioned lawn mower — that

churns a cylindrical wheel over the vines, gently plucking off the berries. On land, it rolls on bicycle wheels.

They use power-window circuits from a car to raise and lower nozzles that spray streams of water, pushing the floating berries toward the giant tube through which they get sucked out of the bog.

To corral the berries, they use an oil containment boom, which they have ripped open, filled with foam and patched. In the off-season, they rake the vines with a sharp tool augmented with 4-inch shoe knives, which are designed to cut shoe leather.

#### SOME COMPETITION

This homespun style is a sharp contrast to the business savvy of Ocean Spray, a cooperative founded in 1930. At one time the company's growers contributed 85 percent of the nation's cranberry yield. That's down to 70 percent now, but it's still been enough to wield major marketing power, and to drive the public appetite for cranberries.

Ocean Spray growers face increasing competition, led by Northland Cranberries, a group of growers that split from the cooperative in the early 1990s.

The travails and the competition has certainly stressed the industry. But by all appearances, cranberry growers in the Pine Barrens will survive the rocky stretch, said Edward Jesse, professor of agricultural and applied economics at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, who specializes in agricultural cooperatives.

"I don't think this by any means spells the demise of the industry in New Jersey," Jesse said.

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