

Cover Story

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Cranberry picking goes high-tech

The operations use global positioning systems out in the bogs. Agri-tourism is a new source of money.

By Jan Hefler

INQUIRER SUBURBAN STAFF

It's like playing a video game, except you are outdoors, in the middle of a shimmering, crystal-blue pond, surrounded by a sea of floating, bright-red cranberries. Oh, and you are sitting on a wet picker, farming equipment that motors across the watery bogs, knocking cranberries off submerged shrubs so that the air-filled fruit can bob to the surface.

Still, you must train your eyes on a laptop, wired to a global positioning system, and steer away from hidden drainage ditches in the bogs. You must watch the screen to see precisely where the fragile bushes are so that you can raise the picker blades and avoid damaging them. You must make sure you don't miss a row.

Cranberry picking has gone high-tech.

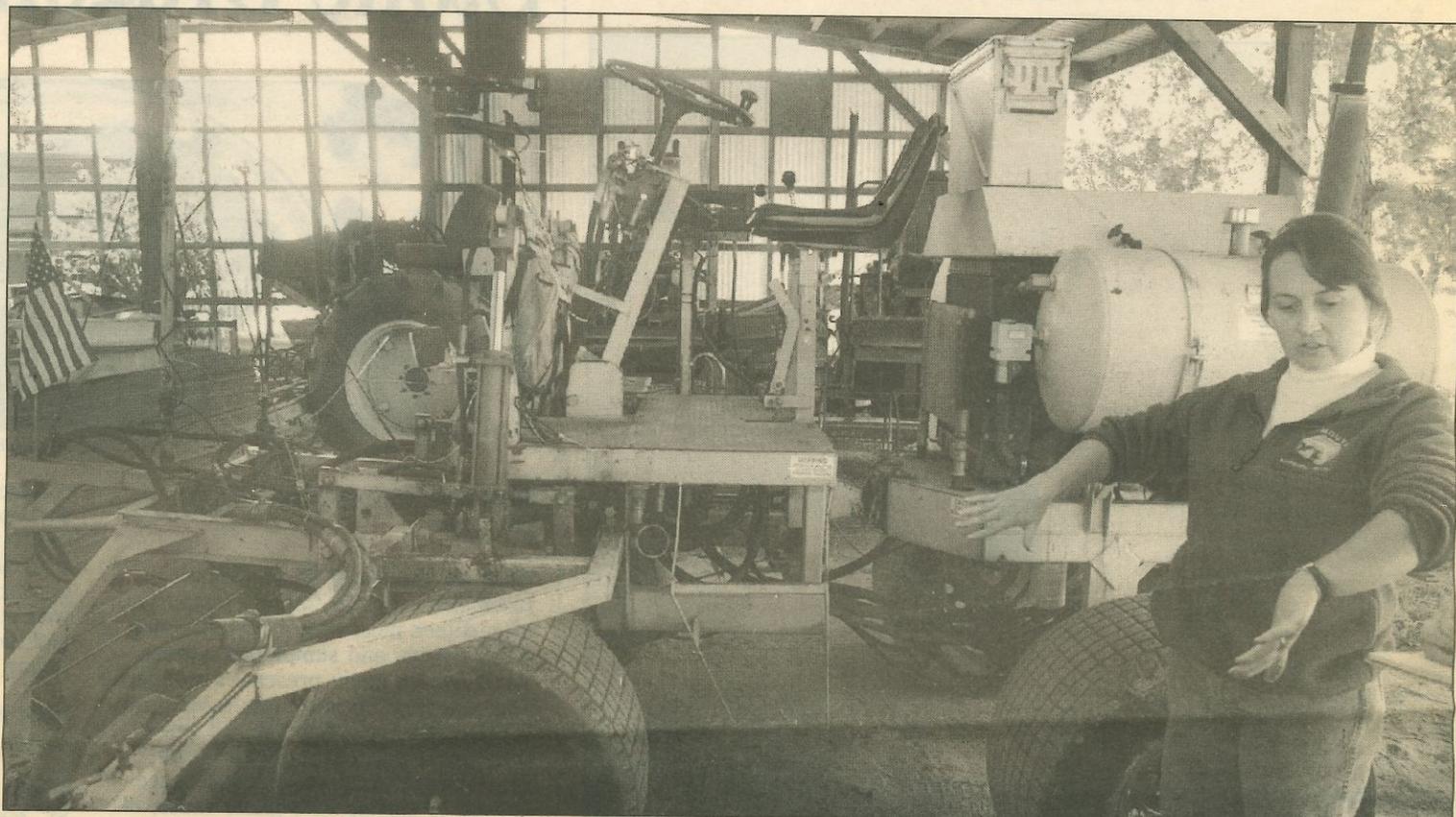
"GPS lets the picker know where he is in the bog," said Brenda Conner, who with her husband, Joe Darlington, owns Joseph J. White Inc., one of Burlington County's largest cranberry operations.

It is fitting that their company is using GPS and other technological advances to increase production on its 360-acre bogs in Pemberton. The couple are fifth-generation cranberry growers, and their ancestors picked cranberries by hand in the 1800s. It wasn't until the 1960s, Conner said, that cranberry harvesting made a giant stride. Farmers learned that if they flooded the cranberry fields and used machinery to shake the berries off the shrubs, the berries would float naturally to the surface, making harvesting far easier.

Conner and Darlington are

ON THE COVER

Tour operator Todd Shuff shows cranberries ready for harvesting at the Joseph J. White farm. Inquirer photo by Sarah J. Glover



SARAH J. GLOVER / Inquirer Staff Photographer
Brenda Conner explains how a GPS device is used for harvesting at Joseph J. White Inc., which she and her husband, Joe Darlington, own.

also experimenting with agri-tourism this year, offering regularly scheduled bus tours of the cranberry bogs during the picturesque harvest, which ends next Sunday. They modified an airport shuttle bus, which has better maneuverability than school buses previously used for occasional tours, to give the public a closer look. There is a unique industry, in which New Jersey ranks fourth in the nation in production.

"Cranberry vines don't like to be walked on, and there are dams and narrow roadways that make it dangerous for people to see the bogs on foot. ... With these special buses, which have a panoramic view, we can get people as close as possible," Conner said.

Conner said this year's weather would also contribute to a boost in production. She expects a yield of 7.5 million pounds of cranberries this season, up from five million last year.

White grows three varieties of cranberries, all of which are sold to Ocean Spray Cranberries Inc., a growers' cooperative. During an interview and tour last week,



This modified airport shuttle bus at Joseph J. White takes visitors around to see the operations. School buses were used sometimes in the past.

the Ben Lears berries were ready for harvest. These are the teardrop-shape, larger-than-normal variety often used to make C'Raisins, dried berries sold in snack boxes like raisins. They were tart, but if you push them into right side of your mouth, where a different set of tastebuds are, they become a tad sweeter. Conner said she offers tourists a taste and all but one has agreed that moving it to the right of the palate improved its

flavor.

The two other varieties are the more common Early Black, sold in supermarkets and used to make cranberry sauces, and the Stevens, a rounder, much sweeter berry. Conner said her company is also exploring experimental varieties with the hope that they might yield better, more pest-resistant, and different-flavored fruit.

Tom Shuff, who drives the tour bus, said the GPS device also plays a role in pesticide

If You Go

What: See the harvest of the Joseph J. White cranberry bogs.

Where: Tours leave from the White Star Country Store, Route 206, Southampton.

When: Today, Sat and next Sun 10 a.m. and 1 p.m.; Thur 1:30 p.m.

Cost: \$19 adults; \$14 children 7-12; \$5 children 3-6; free 2 and under; \$16.50 seniors over 62 on weekdays. Group rates available.

Phone: 609-893-2332

reduction. By pinpointing the bushes that need pesticide, and those that need extra nutrition, the GPS on the wet picker allows the operator to target only those bushes. "We don't want to put pesticide on a plant that doesn't need it," Shuff said. "This allows us to keep all of the plants healthy."

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