

## **Lawn and Garden**

# **Berries bear fruit**

**BY PAT HOLLOWAY**

One of the favorite late summer pastimes of many Alaskans is collecting a variety of wild berries found throughout the state. They provide a source of vitamins and nutrients, especially for people living in remote areas, as well as recreation and relaxation for Alaskan families. The lingonberry, one of the most popular Alaskan berries, is known in various parts of the world as cowberry, foxberry, partridge berry, lowbush cranberry, tytebaer and mountain cranberry.

It is a member of the heath plant family and is related to the more common commercially produced cranberry native to the coastal regions of the continental U.S.

Lingonberries are found throughout Alaska and Canada and extend as far south as Maine and northern Minnesota. These plants are also prevalent in Europe and northern Asia where they are commercially harvested from the forests. The small evergreen shrub is found in just about every forest and bog in Alaska, but it is most abundant in semi-shady, mixed spruce-birch forests with moist, acid-peaty soils.

Pinkish bell-shaped clusters of flowers appear in abundance for late May through June. Their small red berries begin to ripen in late August but are best picked after the first frost when the fruits are soft and a deep wine-red color.

Lingonberries are rich in benzoic acid; therefore no preservatives are needed when harvested. The berries can be stored dry in a cool dark place or in jars of water. They can also be

frozen, dried or canned for a continuous winter supply.

The berries can be eaten raw or cooked and have proven a versatile addition to many home recipes. Any recipe requiring cranberries can easily be adapted to the lingonberry; however, it may require more sugar. The berries have been popular for many years in bread, sauces, stuffing, juices, pies, jam and even ice cream. In Sweden the lingonberries add a different flavor to boiled cabbage and cookies, and in the Soviet Union the juice is bottled into a popular soft drink.

Lingonberries are a major small fruit crop in Scandinavia and the Soviet Union and a minor crop in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland. In Norway the fresh berries are being sold for nearly \$3 a pound. Processed products, especially sauces, are imported in small quantities into the U.S.

In Romania the leaves of the lingonberry are harvested for a medicinal extract, and in Sweden the plant is being researched for its ability to inhibit certain kinds of snow molds.

In Alaska, Finland and Sweden the possibility of cultivating this plant for large-scale fruit production is being researched. Research at the Agricultural Experimental Station in Fairbanks is just now beginning to penetrate the complexities of adapting a wild plant into a cultivated, high-yielding commercial crop.

Further information on the preservation and use of lingonberries is available in several Cooperative Extension Service Bulletins.

*Pat Holloway is graduate student in horticulture at the University of Alaska.*