

Interview with Dr. Jim Brandle on Vineland Research and Innovation Centre
By Lisa Wood

When Dr. Jim Brandle was asked to join the Vineland Research and Innovation Centre as CEO in 2007, he didn't hesitate to accept the position. He is an accomplished agriculture scientist who, since receiving his PhD in plant breeding in 1989, has applied his trade around the world and with the federal government. "It was an opportunity I could not refuse. Innovation is an essential part of the future of Canadian agriculture; I believe I can play a valuable role." What he has become part of is a century-old facility that had grown very tired but is now on the cusp of change. Nestled in the Niagara Region town of Lincoln since 1907, Vineland was showing its age after the failure to make changes in the mid-nineties. It has long been noted for creating the horticulture industry that exists in Niagara today, and more recently, for contributing to the success of the region's wine and greenhouse industries. But by 2006, the reality was that Vineland was understaffed and its buildings and greenhouses were in a state of decay.

That's when Leona Dombrowsky, Minister of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Affairs, established a committee to decide Vineland's fate. "They consulted widely, not only in the region but across the province and even across the country, to see what the options were. Everything was on the table: should it go or should it stay? The outcome of course was that it should stay but with the mandate that it should be meaningful for the province of Ontario, not just regionally. We extended that mandate to national," says Brandle.

Historically, innovation in agriculture had been investigative-driven rather than industry-driven. The committee determined that Vineland needed to be an independent, not-for-profit organization whose primary responsibility was innovation in horticulture; one that was neither academic- nor government-driven; and one that could create a new kind of business-to-business relationship with the horticulture industry.

Brandle's first task was to find the right staff that would contribute to Vineland's new vision to become a world-class research and innovation centre. As part of their mandate to be an industry-driven environment, he had to take the time to talk to stakeholders at the provincial and national levels to find out what it was they were interested in and what their problems were.

By 2008, armed with two batches of \$12.5 million from the provincial government — one for capital and one for operation — as well as federal support, hiring was underway. "As part of understanding what people want, we hired three research directors: one of them leading a group in consumer insights and product innovation, another in applied genomics and a third in horticulture production systems. Those were the three main areas of research where we developed expertise and where we felt it would have the greatest impact on growth in the horticulture industry." The scientists and their teams are now translating industry's priorities into projects that address them.

But research in agriculture is time consuming — don't expect to see any results from early projects until 2012. "We're trying to speed that up with technology scouting to get an early flow of technology into the sector," says Brandle. "You can scout the world for technology or you can scout locally." One result of local scouting is the discovery of a new pear variety that has a higher yield and is disease-resistant so it requires the use of less pesticide. "We found it right next door to Agriculture Canada so we took a license to that and we're currently commercializing that."

Vineland has begun revitalizing a lot of the campus with new labs and facilities. "Once we have all of our staff in place, all of our facilities in place, it will be quite a draw. Vineland Research and Innovation Centre is growing and we are an attractive model for agriculture and agri-business." The facility has already attracted companies and industry to co-locate on their site, like the Canadian Nursery Landscape

Association, the Foreign Affair Winery and Hoogendoorn, the greenhouse technology company. This allows the various stakeholders to work in close proximity to each other and to share knowledge.

If you want to be part of innovation in agriculture at Vineland, there are many avenues that allow you to participate, such as on their board, which is largely an industry group, or their stakeholder committee. Vineland is also creating a new organization called the Friends of Vineland, which allows interested people to participate or help at the facility. There are also opportunities to work on research projects.

Brandle says stakeholders have much to look forward to. “Most exciting now is the fact that we’re right in the operational phase — in that shift from startup to operational organization.” He is confident that over the next five years Vineland’s objectives will be taking shape and it will be a fully staffed and equipped world-class facility. It will have a full suite of partnerships that are driving innovation in horticulture: relationships with producers and producer groups; universities and other academic organizations; government; and downstream commercial partners who can help deliver technology, either out in the sector or where things are delivered through them. And it will have projects underway that address industry’s key priorities for growth.

“We’re going to be making the difference. We’re going to be there to lead the re-diversification of agriculture production in Ontario. The whole innovation agency has suddenly become quite positive. It lost its way. We’re back and it’s back. But be patient.”