



Positive results and continued research to grow okra in Canada

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By Rebecca D Dumais

Canadian farmers could soon be growing okra, thanks to researchers at Vineland Research and Innovation Centre (Vineland). They've been working with the vegetable for five years and results have been extremely positive. This could drastically change the need for Canada's imports on the commodity; over six million kilograms of okra was imported into Canada in 2015 – a 43 percent increase since 2011.

Why choose okra? Well, since demand is up, Vineland research scientist Dr. Viliam Zvalo says it was originally selected as it is one of the 'volume sellers' in the ethnic vegetable category. "There is demand for this vegetable across a range of ethnic groups. Therefore, we felt it (along with Asian eggplant) presented our growers with a significant production opportunity."



Test results

Over the last few years Vineland has tested several varieties, and additional higher-performing hybrid varieties have recently become available. Four cultivars that have been evaluated in field trials since 2015, along with four new hybrids from Thailand were tested in 2017. "They were selected to assess spacing for optimal production on black plastic row covers," says Zvalo. "Of those tested since 2015 (Clemson, Elisa, Jambalaya and Lucky Green) Jambalaya and Lucky Green consistently outperformed the other varieties, and gave the highest marketable yields/ha at 25cm plant-to-plant spacing. Of the new hybrids tested (Beendiya,

Dorotha, Maha and Olathe), Dorotha showed the highest marketable yield/ha at 38cm spacing.”

Okra is a tropical crop that is well suited to hot, dry growing conditions. “Under the production system developed (raised beds covered with black plastic mulch, drip tape installed, double row planting), yields are typically higher during hot summers (such as that experienced in 2015 and 2016 in Ontario), but yields in 2017 (cool and wet by comparison) were still sufficient to make the crop an economically attractive proposition,” Zvalo says. Planting typically takes place in late May/early June, with harvest running from July through October.



Open field

Elisa, Beendiya, Dorotha and Olathe cultivars produce pods, which are typically long and slender (bhindi-type okra) and are more popular in Asian markets, whereas Clemson, Jambalaya, Lucky Green and Maha cultivars produce short and thicker pods that are more popular with American and Caribbean markets. Crops would be grown in open field. While he says it can be grown in the greenhouse, yields per square metre do not currently make it economically viable compared to the alternatives. “The goal is to enable seasonal production of okra for four to five months of the year, providing markets with Canadian-grown okra to replace imports.”

Trials have been carried out in three Canadian provinces: Ontario, Quebec and Manitoba. “The project has provided critical agronomic and varietal information that allows okra to be grown locally,” he says. “Yields per hectare are sufficient to make the crop economically viable, outperforming many traditional vegetable crops in terms of revenue/ha.” Interestingly, Zvalo states productivity levels required to make the crop economically attractive have been achieved in all three provinces.



4-5 month supply

According to Zvalo, growing okra falls under the umbrella of the 'World Crops' program, to build a local ethno-cultural vegetable marketplace that can deliver Canadian-grown fresh produce to supply the country's changing population demographics. "This Vineland-led initiative carried out research on new crop varieties, production technologies, postharvest requirements, consumer insights and market development." Retail engagement has played a critical role in the success of this program, providing demand by major retailers for locally grown okra. "With results from this research program and retail interest, Canadian growers can supply the domestic market for four to five months during the year, creating value for growers and providing consumers with access to fresh, quality local produce."



What are the next steps to continue research and development of this new Canadian commodity? Some additional hybrid trials will be carried out in 2018 in Ontario. Meanwhile, Zvalo says the program will provide 'support' for growers interested in growing the crop commercially or trialing to assess feasibility.

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