

Fruit growers look to science for help

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GRANT LAFLECHE/STANDARD STAFF Vineland Research and Innovation Centre technology scout and grower outreach officer Michael Kauzlaric is shown in the research station's orchard. The centre has developed seven varieties of peaches, nectarines and pears soon to hit markets.

Sometimes all you need to get ahead is some patience, and a little scientific know-how.

Tender fruit growers in Ontario are hoping both qualities will give them a leg up on international competition in the Canadian marketplace.

Last week, researchers from the Vineland Research and Innovation Centre said seven varieties of peaches, nectarines and pears — developed as part of a three-year project with University of Guelph and Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada — will soon be on grocery store shelves.

The process began in 2014 as an effort to give Ontario farmers a competitive edge.

Certain varieties of fruit from such growing regions as California were popular among Canadian consumers and could not be matched by local growers, said Michael Kauzlaric, technology scout and grower outreach officer.

Canadian farmers could try to develop their own varieties, but the process is time-consuming.

"It can take three to five years before you have something," Kauzlaric said.

If farmers are going to wait that long for a new variety, they want to know it's going to be worth it.

So the Vineland Research station took advice from growers about what kind of fruit they want and got about the work of creating those varieties.

Kauzlaric said the fruit genes weren't altered in the lab. Instead, old-fashioned artificial selection was used by cross-breeding varieties with the traits that farmers wanted.

"So one peach might have a particularly nice red colour, and another might have a good sugar content," Kauzlaric said.

Other key traits, including the ability to withstand the Canadian climate and disease resistance, were also priorities.

Every week, growers visited the research station orchard to ask questions and offer feedback on the growing plants.

The project also includes the continuing effort to ensure the plum plox virus doesn't threaten local crops.

Kauzlaric said samples of the trees are sent to a federal government lab in Vancouver to be tested for the virus, which can have a drastic impact on the marketability of fruit from infected trees. He said the virus can be "cleaned" from the samples before they are returned to Ontario to be planted.

In 2000, tens of thousands of tender fruit trees were destroyed in a \$40-million effort to halt the spread of the virus.

Kauzlaric said the ongoing testing ensures the virus cannot get a foothold in Niagara again.

Since the project started, more than 2,000 peach, plum, apricot and pear trees have been planted in 18 commercial orchards in Ontario.

The first fruit from these trees will be hitting the market soon, even as the program continues to create new varieties. Kauzlaric said the program is looking to renew its funding in the fall.