

### **Local food is becoming more worldly and diverse: The New Farm**

Two dozen farmers in Ontario, B.C., Quebec and Manitoba are growing about 60 hectares of okra, Chinese eggplant and other world crops.

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By Owen Roberts, Special to The Star



*Viliam Zvalo, a vegetable production researcher, and his team are figuring out the best management and production practices for growing world crops. (Sian Richards for the Toronto Star)*

Ontario farmers already grow or raise some 200 kinds of commodities, crops and livestock. Consumers enjoy a cornucopia of great tasting food choices.

But research suggests there's an opportunity for more, driven mainly by food preferences of the country's ethnically and culturally diverse population.

In fact, it's estimated that new Canadians — many of whom have vegetable-based diets — will drive more than 60 per cent of the growth of fresh produce sales.

That's huge. University of Guelph researchers determined back in 2012 that the market for what are now called "world crops" was already more than \$60 million a month, just in the Greater Toronto Area. Further studies now peg that estimate at \$80 million.

World crops cover the gamut: Chinese long eggplant, Indian round eggplant, okra, callaloo, Chinese and Thai hot chili peppers, bottle gourd, fuzzy melon, Chinese green onions, Indian red carrot, daikon radish and tomatillo, among others.

For the most part, these crops are imported. But freshness, safety and quality are not always optimal with imports.

Then there's the environment. "Imagine the carbon footprint, trucking and flying in all these imports," said Viliam Zvalo, a vegetable production researcher at Vineland Research and Innovation Centre in Vineland, Ont.

With funding support from the Ontario government, Zvalo and his research team are working with commercial-scale farmers and retailers to help develop and sell locally produced varieties of the world crops with the most potential to thrive in Canada: Chinese and Indian eggplant, and okra.

They're making progress. Today, two dozen farmers in Ontario, B.C., Quebec and Manitoba are growing about 60 hectares of these world crops. Major grocery chains are stocking them, enamoured with their freshness and local point of origin.

Their success is seen in the drop of imported eggplant: it declined by 800,000 kilograms last year. All major retailers are sourcing local okra and eggplant in season.

Farmers like world crop profitability. A Quebec on-farm study showed okra can generate profits of up to \$18,000 per hectare. Farmers have to work hard for that money; okra and Chinese eggplant are inherently challenging to grow.

Both crops must be hand-picked, and at just the right time, or quality falls off.

Zvalo and his research team are figuring out best management and production practices so that growers can achieve high yield and quality. They're also working to grow popular world crops in greenhouses, so they are available to consumers 10 months of the year.

These crops are catching on everywhere. Students at Heydon Park Secondary school in downtown Toronto have been growing world crops for their school cafeteria and for farmers markets. Earlier this month, they hosted Ontario agriculture, food and rural affairs minister Jeff Leal, to kick off Local Food Week.

There, he announced a campaign called Bring Home the World, to help expand the availability of locally grown produce.

"Ontario's agri-food sector is booming in a way that meets the needs of a growing and diverse population," Leal said.

So make that 200-plus commodities that are now grown in Ontario. Local food is looking very worldly.

World crop consumption is up

World crops may be a key to getting Canadians to eat more vegetables. From 2011 to 2015, consumption of Chinese eggplant and okra rose 32 per cent and 45 per cent respectively. "Interest in these crops in Canada is for real, and climbing," Zvalo said.

Food that's easy to prepare

Food waste sometimes occurs because consumers don't know how to prepare what they buy, and end up throwing it out. But Chinese eggplant requires minimal preparation. It's versatile and can be cut up and added directly to dishes such as stir-frys, with garlic sauce and oyster sauce.

<https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/urban-farming/2017/06/19/local-food-is-becoming-more-worldly-and-diverse-the-new-farm.html>