

The perfect peach is just a few years away
Vineland Research Station leading a drive to find several
new varieties of peaches for Canada

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Mike Kauzlaric scours the world for peach trees that can be grown successfully in Canada. He's part of a research team at Vineland Research Station in Niagara who test new kinds of fruits, vegetables and ornamental plants. (SONIA DAY)

Here's something to ponder this holiday weekend. What's your idea of a perfect peach? Or an absolutely awesome apricot?

Is the colour of supreme importance? Do you prefer the flesh to be orange, pink or tinged with red? Are you put off by skin that looks a bit green?

Then, there's the matter of taste. Should your ideal peach or apricot be very sweet — or does flavour rate higher? And what about texture . . . do you go for chin-dribblingly juicy — or a fairly dry consistency?

These are the kinds of questions that the folks at Vineland Research Station in Niagara think about a lot, as they strive to find foodstuffs and garden plants that we finicky consumers will want to buy — and which can be grown successfully in

our difficult climate.

Answers are a long time coming, too. Whether they're experimenting with sweet potatoes from Carolina, a long, pale purple eggplant that originated in China, a hardy new shrub rose that will grow in the north, or peaches and apricots that haven't been tried in Canada before, not one of these potential winners is destined to become an overnight success. Instead, they're painstakingly tinkered with for years and years, until they get the green light to go into production.

But that's how it is everywhere, in this exacting business.

"The popular new apple called Honey Crisp? It comes from Minnesota and took 15 years to develop," Dr. Michael Brownbridge, Vineland's research director told me, as we strolled through long, green fields bursting with crops during the station's annual open house last week.

"This is an industry where results take a very long time, because so many factors have to be taken into account."

What consumers are drawn to is only one component of the equation. Vineland (which opened nearly a decade ago and is funded by both government and private industry) works closely with scientists around the world, farmers all over Canada, the U.S and abroad, and many different agricultural and horticultural businesses. Every one of them has a stake in helping a brand new fruit, vegetable or ornamental plant become a commercial success, rather than an expensive failure.

In the case of peaches, Vineland is leading a drive to find several new varieties for Canada, after a virus called plum pox wiped out nearly 400,000 peach and nectarine trees in Niagara 17 years ago. The fallout from this devastating scourge led many growers to kiss peaches goodbye — and plant grape vines instead.

But here's the good news: When the newbie varieties eventually go on sale, they are likely to taste really good. That's because the crop of many of those old peach orchards was headed for a canning plant in St. Davids and the emphasis back then was on quantity, not quality.

But who eats industrial canned peaches anymore? Not many of us. The plant closed several years ago, and as health-conscious consumers gravitate toward buying more fresh fruit (especially if it's locally grown), Vineland is testing peach, nectarine and apricot varieties which focus on flavour — and the ability to be harvested early. That way, we can be tucking into these summertime treats during July instead of August.

The Vineland newcomers don't have enticing names yet — each variety is identified by an instantly forgettable number like V2SR911 — but I got to sample a few at the open house. And boy, they sure are delicious.

But don't look for them in the supermarket yet.

"We're still a few years away from completing our trials," explained Michael Kauzlaric, Vineland's "techno-scout", who scours the world for fruit varieties that might work in Canada and was happily handing out free samples at the open house. "We think the potential is certainly there."

Sounds wonderful, Mike. Bring on those perfect peaches. And nectarines. And apricots. My mouth is watering already.

Note: If you're partial to peaches (and who isn't?) don't miss the Niagara Peach Festival, at Niagara on the Lake the weekend of August 12 and 13. All kinds of fresh peaches and other delish eats, plus music by live bands. Yum. Details at infoniagara.com

<https://www.thestar.com/life/2017/08/04/the-perfect-peach-is-just-a-few-years-away.html>