

Worldly food takes root in Ontario

Locally grown 'world crops' include daikon radish, okra and Chinese green onions

Special Report: World Crops, GT5, September 16, 2017

By Dick Snyder, Special to the Star



Eggplant grows at the Vineland Research and Innovation Centre in Lincoln, Ont. The centre has been focusing on world crops since it opened about 10 years ago.

Chef Rob Gentile is tickled pink. Or, rather, green.

He's finally found an Ontariofarmed source for an obscure — in North America, anyway — plant called agretti. Identified by needleshaped leaves, the bright-green succulent is more at home in seaside soils in Lazio, Italy, where it is also known as saltwort and friar's beard. In Japan, it is known as land seaweed.

Agretti became a darling for foodies when British chefs began clamouring for it a couple of years ago.

Agretti-mania partially caused a shortage in the U.K., after a bad year resulted in a shortage of seeds.

Finding a local source for the plant is the kind of discovery that makes Gentile as excited as a child on Christmas morning. The plant is grown by Trend Aquafresh in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ont.

“Every time we can get it, we use lots of it,” says Gentile, who cooks for Toronto’s Buca restaurants and is a partner in King Street Foods.

“Throw it in salads, sauté it . . . it adds wonderful salinity and flavour. It’s great with pasta and clams, and pairs nicely with eel and crab.”

He describes it as “salty and aromatic and vegetal in flavour.” For some, it’s similar to spinach. “Any time I can make that connection, an Italian ingredient grown here in Canada, I get really excited. Canadian-grown ingredients are by far my favourite, because they’re so damn fresh. The ingredients are real. You know where they came from, you know what the season is. When things are imported, there’s always an underlying question mark.”

Trend Aquafresh is a hydroponic and organic farm growing salad greens, herbs and fish on 1.6 hectares in a fully sustainable environment with zero waste. It is one of many small and innovative farms serving a demand for locally grown foods from around the world.

These “world foods” or “world crops” are getting more attention lately, as interest in exotic (or, more correctly, non-native) foods has grown in recent years.

“About five years ago, I was doing some trendy January cleanse and I had to ask my grocery store, Fiesta Farms, to get a couple of things for me,” says Ceri Marsh, a Toronto cookbook author.

“Chia seeds, acai powder and hemp hearts — the kinds of things you’d normally only find in a health-food store. Now, there is a full aisle dedicated to superfoods at Fiesta. And I don’t even think people consider them specialty items anymore.”

Much of the consumer demand for these foods comes from new Canadians. An estimated 60 per cent of the growth in fresh produce sales is being driven by newcomers and their preference for vegetable-centric meals.

Earlier this year, Jeff Leal, Ontario’s minister of agriculture, food and rural affairs, earmarked \$1 million for the Greenbelt Fund to allocate to projects to help increase awareness of local food, with an emphasis on world foods.

Grants from the Greenbelt Fund support local food accessibility. For every \$1 invested by the fund, local food sales increase by \$13. Overall, agriculture in Ontario contributes \$35.4 billion to the province’s gross domestic product.

World crops are seen as a way to increase those numbers. The University of Guelph estimated in 2012 that the market for world crops in the GTA represented about \$60 million. That estimate has since risen to \$80 million.

“Ontarians have diversified their diets and broadened their taste buds to include foods from around the world over the past couple of decades and they continue to

look for new food options,” says Kathy Macpherson, a vice-president at the Greenbelt Fund and the Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation.

“Having locally grown and raised world foods is a real plus: consumers know they are fresh and safe, and farmers can expand what they can grow and raise.”

Chef and George Brown College professor Bashir Munye obtained a grant from the Greenbelt Fund to create a local food guide to help Ontarians of African heritage to identify and access locally grown African crops.

“As a Somali person, I need to access food that is held within my DNA — okra, ginger, turmeric, peanuts, callaloo — world crops that are locally grown,” Munye says.

“Not only it is economically and environmentally important, but (it) is also a social imperative if we want to foster diversity.”

While we’re starting to see more of these world foods on grocery store shelves, it can take a considerable amount of time to get them there. Leal’s Bring Home the World initiative is meant to give world foods a boost, with the ultimate goal of increasing Ontario’s access to locally grown foods and reduce reliance on imports. Ontario grows more than 200 foods already, and Leal is committed to increasing that number.

For one, he sees this as a natural response to Ontario’s diverse and growing population, driving the need for locally grown and culturally appropriate foods.

At Ontario’s Vineland Research and Innovation Centre, world crops have been a focus since the centre opened about 10 years ago.

Amy Bowen leads a team looking deeply at consumer insights and market intelligence to inform research into the kinds of foods that have a potential local market and, importantly, have the ability to be grown in Ontario.

“What got this project started was realizing that, with Canada’s changing demographics, there would probably be different food offerings that we could grow and provide locally versus importing into the country,” Bowen says.

“We started this project around 2010, trying to understand what vegetables consumers are interested in. We made a comprehensive list . . . and started planting them to see how they would perform, and we also looked at the cost of production. Because it’s one thing to be able to grow them, and another to be able to produce them in a way that is sustainable and profitable for the farmer.”

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A diverse global harvest comes home

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By Sean Deasy, Special to the Star



Asian eggplant harvested at the Vineland Research and Innovation Centre.

From amaranth and African eggplant to turmeric and Vietnamese balm, there is a wide range of world crops grown commercially in Ontario — and some for years now.

These non-traditional crops are becoming more popular, mainly due to a demographic shift and changing culinary preferences of Canadians, experts say. There are currently more than 200 distinct crops spread across each of the main food categories: fruit, vegetables, grains, fungi, and edible herbs and spices.

Crops can be found in regions across the province and can include Asian pear, Niger seed, Abyssinian cabbage, New Zealand spinach, Japanese plum, Chinese mushroom, Welsh onion, Indian bitter melon (Karella), Shanghai pak choi, Spanish salsify, Nanking cherry and tomatillo, among many others.

Vineland Research and Innovation Centre in Lincoln, Ont., has been developing production systems for okra and Asian eggplant in particular, so that Canadian growers can produce these crops and capitalize on the opportunity to meet the growing demand. These crops are traditionally grown in South East Asia where climatic conditions differ greatly from those in Canada.

“Our focus has been on okra and Asian eggplant,” said Dr. Viliam Zvalo, a vegetable production research scientist at Vineland.

“These crops were almost exclusively imported to Canada until quite recently. Imports have been rising significantly over the past five years (okra by 42 per cent

and eggplant by 38 per cent) and continue to climb as the popularity of okra and eggplant continues to grow.”

At present, there are approximately 53 hectares of okra and eggplant grown in Canada.

And retailers have been very supportive of local production, as okra and varieties of eggplant can now be found in major grocery stores in the province.