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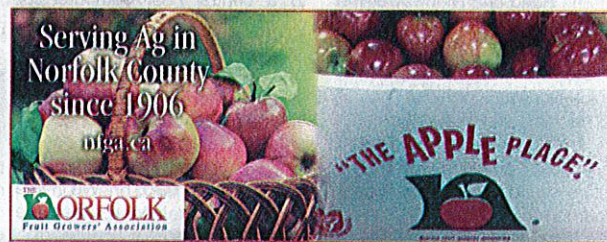
It's a long journey

Dr. Daryl Somers has bitten into a tasty, but lengthy project as he develops a new apple for Ontario. The director for applied genomics at Vineland Research and Innovation Centre figures it will take 15 or 20 years before it will be ready for the fresh apple market.

"We've already been working on this for seven years," he said, noting that 25,000 apple trees are now growing at Vineland's experimental farm in the quest to develop the new apple. It was through conversations with the Ontario Apple Growers that first got him interested in the idea as it is hoping to refresh the apple mix currently on the market.

Dr. Somers created a three-part process in the quest for a new apple variety, and along the way there has been lots of tasting of what's being grown.

He and his colleagues began experimenting in 2011 with commercial apples, especially the Honey Crisp, Ambrosia and Gala varieties that are popular for eating as a fresh juicy apple. "These are



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to develop a new Ontario apple



high density plantings", he noted. "There isn't much opportunity to get a good look at tree performance at this density. That comes later. We are more interested in the taste at this stage."

As Somers and staff tasted the offspring from these apple producing trees, most were discarded. Occasionally there was one that might be appropriate to put before Vineland's consumer insights groups. "Their opinions are very important to us," he said, "and we've learned that along with taste, texture is important to consumers."

He does point out that there is a great deal of satisfaction for him as he tastes those experimental apples. He's aware that he is tasting something for the very first time, something that has been never tasted by anyone else.

The search for the new Ontario apple is currently at the beginning of the second stage. Of all of those planted in the first stage, only about one per cent ever move forward, Dr. Somers explained. That's when staff propagates eight copies of each of the trees growing the fruit that was best liked in all of those tasting tests.

In stage two, a lot more fruit is generated and he starts to get a much better picture of the taste profile and the size of the apple. "We actually do spend a lot of time concentrating on size and appearance," he said, "to meet market specifications."

It also is when he takes a deeper look at the trees themselves.



Dr. Daryl Somers is heading research into developing a new Ontario apple for the fresh market. It is a lengthy process to get the perfect taste, look and size of the apple along with a tree that meets growers' preferences.

He wants to know if they lack resistance to disease like scab. Storage ability is another route that has to be investigated.

When the project moves to stage three, Vineland researchers will go to the province's six main apple growing districts. They will be looking for growers willing to participate in on-farm trials. "We most definitely will be approaching growers in Norfolk County," he said.

It is vital to get feedback from farmers, he said, and to engage in conversations along the way with buyers and marketers. It's important to build these relationships, he said.

After all his efforts, does Dr. Somers get to name the new apple? No, it's not like McIntosh, named in honour of the McIntosh family who developed that variety by accident in the mid-1800s. Instead naming will be left to a marketing team. "Apples are

pretty unique in the horticulture world in that they are the only fruits on grocery shelves that have names," he said.

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