

Vineland seeks partner to market new apple varieties

The first promising candidates are being trialed by seven Canadian growers

BY LILIAN SCHAER
Ontario Farmer



Apple breeders at Vineland Research and Innovation Centre are looking for partners to help them bring new, made-in-Ontario apple varieties to market.

As the Vineland Research and Innovation Centre's apple breeding program inches closer to identifying successful new varieties, the Niagara Region research organization is looking for partners to help choose and bring the best ones to market.

Last year, five Ontario growers and one each in Quebec and Nova Scotia received the first test trees for on-farm trials of promising new varieties that are currently in Vineland's breeding pipeline.

The growers will be conducting several years of tests to evaluate how well the trees perform in real-world orchard settings and gather data on all aspects of tree and fruit performance.

A key goal for Vineland is to make sure their varieties do well in Ontario's major apple growing regions along the shores of Georgian Bay, Lake Erie, Lake Huron, and Lake

Ontario, as well as in other Canadian provinces.

"We've been working on behind-the-scenes planning since 2020 and planning the path to market for potential varieties if something from these first trials ends up passing the test and being worthy of a release," says Amanda Moen, business development advisor at Vineland.

"This is the next step in terms of being able to properly evaluate the apples and find the right partner to fill the roles that aren't within Vineland's wheelhouse."

That includes evaluating the varieties and making strategic recommendations on what the best path to market would be.

Vineland has issued a Request for Expressions of Interest (REOI), what Moen describes as an informal, non-binding exercise to hopefully attract various potential collaborators. The next step will be a more structured, formal request to seek out actual partners with complete proposals.

"A big part of what we want to hear is who the players are that would be interested in working with us," she says. "We have quite a bit of knowledge in the industry already, but we believe there is good value in hearing from the industry so we can build relationships to fill the gaps."

Although there is a preference for a Canadian entity to

fill the role, Moen stresses that any partner must meet Vineland's end goal of maximizing the value of its breeding program.

Any international partners, though, have to demonstrate a strong commitment to working with the Canadian industry to get Vineland varieties to Canadian growers and ultimately, Canadian consumers.

The first crosses in Vineland's apple breeding were made in 2011, and for the last five years, researchers have selected 10 to 20 trees every year to move forward for testing on the Vineland campus.

To be considered, candidate trees must produce crisp, juicy fruit, but characteristics like fruit storability, flavour, tree performance and disease resistance also matter.

Fruit from promising cultivars is also tested by Vineland's trained sensory panel to ensure their taste, flavours and textures match consumer preferences.

As part of the breeding program, Vineland has also developed its own DNA markers for disease resistance and flavour that ultimately will make it more cost effective and quicker to bring new apple varieties to market.

The first Vineland apple variety should be available for grower planting by 2028, with a first crop on store shelves in 2030.

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Wheat breeding returns \$33 per dollar invested

A new study out of Western Canada claims the return on wheat breeding is \$33 for every dollar invested.

The authors said they considered only the impact on yield, not other factors such as insect and disease control achieved via other methods such as pesticides and the benefits from adopting improved management practices.

Farmers support wheat breeding via checkoffs.

The organizations involved are members of the Canadian Wheat Research Coalition (CWRC). They are the Saskatchewan Wheat Development Commission, Alberta Wheat Commission, and Manitoba Crop Alliance, along with the Western Grains Research Foundation (WGRF), and the Saskatchewan Winter Cereals

Development Commission (SWCDC).

"This study clearly indicates that farmer investment in public breeding programs is working and is providing substantive returns to farmers," said Fred Greig, chairman of the CWRC and Manitoba Crop Alliance representative.

"Our measure is conservative because we don't include many other potential benefits. It does provide a very defensible estimate because we can measure it accurately," said Gray.

"Wheat yields are something that everybody sees. They understand that the new varieties are better than the older varieties, yielding better, and improved yields are the key trait that delivers value back to the producer."