

FOCUS: SEED & ROOTSTOCK

New varieties of table grapes show promise in Niagara



Fresh Grape Growers of Ontario hosted a tasting event at the Vineland Research and Innovation Centre (Vineland) on September 22, 2023. L-R: Edith Arancibia, leader of the Canada project for Bloom Fresh; Michael Kauzlaric, technology scout and grower outreach, Vineland; Sarah Marshall, Ontario Fresh Grape Growers Marketing Board; Nicolas Vargas, technical manager for Bloom Fresh U.S. Timpson is a promising fresh table grape variety.

KAREN DAVIDSON

Tucked into a tangle of vines, there is a glow of green seedless grapes. Once they're brought into the sunlight, they look tantalizing enough to eat. For the curious, Timpson is the name.

Bloom Fresh, an international fruit-breeding company, wants the name of that proprietary variety to stick. To date, the Niagara peninsula is the most northerly latitude for the

company that licensed the production of premium grapes in more than 24 countries. As recently as August 2023, the company was created through a merger of SNFL Group (Special New Fruit Licensing) and International Fruit Genetics.

The Vineland Research and Innovation Centre (Vineland) has been home to five varieties – Timpson (Sheegene 2), Strawgrape (Sheegene 26), Ivory (Sheegene 21), Magenta (Sheegene 3) and K2 (Navsel 4) --

since they were planted at the Vineland test block in 2019 with clean plant material coming from virus testing at the Sidney, British Columbia facility operated by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. The Timpson green seedless grapes are leading the pack with their quality and unique taste. They were so promising in 2022 at Vineland's grape open house that three acres were planted at a commercial grower's block in 2023.

"We have a great vision for the

future in Canada," says Edith Arancibia, Fresno, California, who has been leading the Bloom Fresh project and developing awareness of table grapes.

"In the last year, local growers have expressed interest in our varieties, mostly Timpson. We licensed this variety in Canada in two local nurseries," says Arancibia. They are Canadian Fruit Tree Nursery and Vinetech.

Michael Kauzlaric, technology scout and grower outreach for Vineland, has been working on new grape varieties for more than a decade. The project leapt forward in 2014 when Josep Estiarte, currently chief innovation officer at Bloom Fresh, agreed to allow Vineland to evaluate the potential of these new varieties in the Canadian climate.

"With a global company such as Bloom Fresh putting their confidence in Vineland, I sense a new momentum," says Kauzlaric. "This is the coldest site they have grown in."

At a September 2023 tasting event at Vineland, growers remarked on the vigorous growth habits of the grape varieties, noting that more canopy management would be required to ripen the crop. The Bloom Fresh team agreed. In 2024, the experts want to try a different trellis system, sharpen the vine trimming for better airflow and customize the spray program for more efficacious coverage. Along with local consultants, the plan is to tailor 2024 management for better yields and quality.

Growers are also eyeballing the variety called Strawgrape, so named for its unique strawberry-like flavour. It's an early-maturing red variety with a small berry size.

"Shatter at harvest is

something we have seen before in other countries," explains Arancibia. "In conjunction with Vineland, we are thrilled to conduct experiments to improve the performance of the varieties and develop specific regional growing protocols. We are continuously administering different treatments and management according to each variety's needs in order to guarantee high-quality production for our licensed growers."

Having worked in her native Chile, Arancibia notes that it takes times for growers to adopt new varieties under different growing regimes. Once growers make the change, she says they often regret not moving more quickly.

Another aspect is the consumer environment. How easily will consumers accept new grape varieties?

"When I was in Ontario, I toured supermarkets on my own time," she says. "Your retailers emphasize locally grown and they are very proud of their produce which I really like. Also offering new varieties to consumers will allow them to compare grapes and make the best shopping choice for them."

For Ontario growers who sense a season-lengthening opportunity in new fresh grape varieties, the arrival of Bloom Fresh has been a confidence booster.

"This is an exciting time for growers and consumers in Ontario," says David Hipple, chair of the Ontario Fresh Grape Marketing Board. "New locally grown table grape varieties are a huge opportunity to extend our season and reduce reliance on imports."

 The advertisement for Seminova features a central logo with a stylized orange 'S' inside a leaf shape, with the word 'SEMINOVA' in bold black letters below it. To the right of the logo is a vertical strip of various colorful vegetable seeds. On the left, there are three images: a field of green leafy vegetables, a close-up of a white vegetable head (possibly a cauliflower or cabbage), and a person kneeling in a field working with soil. At the bottom left, contact information for Jeremy Schotsman is provided.

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