

Making ethnic markets pay

In Toronto alone, consumers are buying \$400 million a year of imported ethnic vegetables. Could it make sense to grow them here?

BY LOIS HARRIS

Edamame, okra, bitter melon, quinoa, Chinese long eggplant — all these are edible crops that you'd have had a hard time finding on the country's store shelves 50 years ago, let alone growing in Canadian fields and greenhouses.

They're still crops that few Canadian farmers know about, and that even fewer have considered growing.

But maybe that's about to change.

Research into crop varieties and production systems is already underway to help speed such a change. But it will also take a change in farm thinking about whether the opportunity is big enough to justify the cost of breaking into the unknown.

The sector is still extremely small. In Ontario in 2015, for example, only 2,900 acres were planted to specialty crops, with a farm gate value of about \$15.5 million.

Yet that's enough to convince enthusiasts that "ethnocultural" crops can be successfully produced, and that they are on the cusp of becoming lucrative money-makers for growers across the country.

"Opportunities are definitely there to increase production, if growers do their homework to fill niche markets," says Evan Elford, the new crop development specialist with the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs.

Elford says that, while there has been a recent upswing in interest, specialty crops have actually been researched and investigated in Canada for 40 years.

"When you look at bok choy and Napa cabbage, they've been around for decades," Elford says.

Such specialty crops are defined as "a broad category of niche crops not included in major grains, oilseed, industrial or horticultural crops," Elford says. "They are considered non-traditional crops that may be new to the region, or are underutilized native species, while others are re-emerging crops previously grown in the province."

Today, three of the most promising new-to-Canada vegetables to come from the Vineland Research and Innovation Centre are okra, Chinese long eggplant and Indian round eggplant.

VINELAND TRIALS

The modern impetus for investigating the crops was a University of Guelph study that determined there are 800,000 Canadians of South Asian descent in the Greater Toronto Area, and they are spending as much as \$33 million a month on these kinds of vegetables, almost all of which are imported.

The research strategy is to replace at least some of the imports by developing vegetable varieties that local farmers can grow in Canadian climates.

"The whole objective is to find out if these vegetables could be adapted to Ontario and Canadian conditions," says research scientist Viliam Zvalo.

Zvalo was brought into Vineland's "Feeding Diversity: Bringing World Crops to Market" program in 2014 and has had great success in figuring out the best ways to grow the three crops.

In fact, in 2015, six larger commercial growers and several smaller ones planted 80 acres of the Asian eggplants and okra — mostly in Ontario, but in pockets in Quebec, British Columbia and the Maritimes, as well.

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EGGPLANTS OF THE FUTURE

“Twenty-four million kilograms of eggplant were imported into Canada in 2014,” Zvalo says, adding that the number dropped in 2015 by two per cent, and he speculates that local production was responsible.

In order to thrive, these eggplants must grow on black plastic mulch on raised beds to warm the soil in early spring. Drip irrigation is also a must — and was especially needed during the hot, dry summer of 2016.

Field production of the crop is good, but the greenhouse is much better, yielding 35 kilograms per square metre, which rivals pepper yields. The greenhouse season is also much longer — starting in January and ending in December. Grafting the eggplant on tomato rootstock increases volume by 95 per cent and reduces the disease threat to nearly nil.

Currently, 30 to 35 per cent of eggplants sold in Canada are ethnic, and Zvalo believes that the future is in the ethnic varieties, since they are smaller and easier for consumers to prepare.

With a potential for \$5,000 to \$9,700 per acre in profits, Asian eggplants are an attractive option for growers, as well.



Research is making quick strides in learning how to make production of ethnic vegetables, including these eggplants, commercially viable in Canada, says Vineland’s Viliam Svalo.

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OKRA MAY BE EVEN MORE PROFITABLE THAN EGGPLANT, WITH PRICES AVERAGING NEAR \$2.65 PER POUND



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The keys, according to Maharaj, are the demand from South and East Asian consumers, and the freshness of the local product.

“You can get local product picked, packed and on the shelves in three to four days,” he says. Imports take five to eight days and get stressed from being put on ships from Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic or Honduras and then transferred to trucks at Miami before reaching their final destinations in Ontario grocery stores.

The Su family started experimenting with Chinese eggplants as part of their personal garden three years ago. When that turned out really well, they decided to start growing them commercially.

“We are a small operation, so we have to grow what no one else wants to,” says Henry Su. He and his parents grow green and yellow zucchini, Chinese eggplants and, most recently, jalapenos on 30 acres of sandy loam soil in Norfolk County, Ont. They’ve been growing eggplants on 10 of those acres for two years.

During the summer harvest, Su drives a truckload of produce every midnight to the Ontario Food Terminal where buyers pay a “decent price” for his specialty eggplants.

“We can’t compete on quantity, so we have to have the quality,” he says, noting that while the family would like to expand their acreage, they don’t want to get so big that they can’t keep an eye on everything every day.

OKRA — FINICKY BUT PROFITABLE

Okra is a much more labour-intensive and finicky crop to grow, but if successful, farmers can get fantastic returns on investment.

“You need to get the right number of plants per acre and spacing is critical,” Zvalo says, adding that harvesting the pods at their best means picking plants every day

during the season — in August and September. Labour — needed for the entire growing season — is a big cost for okra growers.

But the cost of growing it can be offset by the market price that okra commands. While okra yields are about half the eggplant levels, at 20 tonnes per acre versus 35 to 40 tonnes, the price differential is more than double, with okra getting \$2.65 per pound versus a pound of eggplant at \$1.10.

Six million kilograms of okra are imported into Canada every year. Research trials and commercial operations are growing the crop in British Columbia, Quebec and Ontario — mostly where the highest ethnic populations reside — but there have been experiments in the Maritimes and Manitoba, as well.

The crop can be lucrative, if the conditions are right like the summers of 2015 and 2016, and as long as proper management techniques are used. One grower with a farm near Montreal had five acres of okra in 2015 and sold the crop for about \$36,000.

Both Elford and Zvalo caution that anyone looking to grow ethnocultural crops should really research the marketplace, and line up buyers before even thinking about planting. Both have or are developing online tools to help growers better understand the risks and benefits of growing these crops:

OMAFRA Specialty Croppportunities is an online guide to the agronomics, business management and marketing of dozens of specialty crops. It also has a regularly updated blog with information about workshops, meetings, growing tips and advice. www.omafra.gov.on.ca/CropOp/en/index.html.

Production Calculator is a new online calculator that Vineland Research and Innovation Centre will roll out early this year. It will provide both cost and revenue expectations for okra and eggplant crops. Costs include everything from pre-planting through fertilizing and pest control to harvest. Revenues are forecast on pessimistic (low), expected (medium) and optimistic (high) yields. All estimates are based on real-life examples. **CG**