

NATIONAL POST

Bringing world flavours and foods home to Canada

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By Green Belt Fund



It's projected that by 2036, more than 55 per cent of newcomers to Canada will be from China, India and the Philippines. Eggplant (pictured) and okra figure prominently in the diets of these countries. Photo: Getty Images

Nothing says summer in Canada better than serving up a fresh array of seasonal, local food to enjoy with family and friends.

We're so lucky in Ontario to have access to more than 200 farm and food products that are grown and made right here. And the list of Ontario-grown food continues to grow each year as new world foods, like fruits and vegetables and cultural meats, are added to meet the growing demands of our multicultural taste buds.

Growing our global garden

Changing Canadian demographics and evolving consumer tastes are opening new marketplace opportunities for farmers, food processors and researchers to bring world crops, not traditionally grown in Canada, and ethnic foods to consumers and food lovers.

A recent report by Vineland Research and Innovation Centre (Vineland) — a world-class facility dedicated to horticultural science and innovation — predicts demand for world crops like eggplant and okra will grow 46 per cent and 68 per cent, respectively, by 2026.

“Canadian consumption of eggplant and okra is growing as the traditional Canadian diet evolves alongside immigration patterns,” said Dr. Michael Brownbridge, Vineland’s Research director of Horticultural Production Systems.



Vegetables popular in other parts of the globe, but not traditionally grown in Canada, like okra, are gaining popularity with Canadian consumers. Photo: Supplied

“Most of these world crops vegetables are currently imported into Canada from the United States, the Caribbean and Asia. Our research worked to remove barriers, like helping crops adapt to Canada’s shorter growing climate and developing market opportunities for new fruits and vegetables, is paying off.”

One major Canadian retailer reported a 50 per cent increase in local sourcing of Asian long eggplant in 2016 compared to the previous year. Vineland predicts the growing demand for world crops will increase market potential and drive domestic production to replace imports.

“Our market research has shown consumers have a preference for fresh, locally-grown produce if prices are comparable,” said Brownbridge.

Vineland’s World Crops program was funded in part by the Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation, a charitable grant-making organization working to help keep farmers successful, strengthen local economies, and protect and grow natural features.

Vineland has consolidated its research findings at feedingdiversity.vinelandresearch.com which offers extensive information about specific varieties that can grow in Canada’s cold and short season climate, along with best practices to grower minimize costs.

Meeting cultural tastes

Fruits and vegetables aren’t the only food items gaining shelf space in Canadian grocery stores. The demand for halal meat is growing and presenting an additional opportunity for farmers, food producers and processors.

Halal refers to food products, including meat, that are prepared following Islamic dietary laws and regulations that determine what is permissible, lawful and clean. The word halal literally means “lawful,” or “permissible” in Arabic.



Canadian farmers are growing produce and meats that cater to our increasingly diverse food culture. Photo: Supplied

Parkhill Meats Ltd. is an Ontario meat processor outside of London, Ont., that’s making investments in its facility to meet the growing demand for local halal meat products.

The meat processor works with local farmers to source the highest quality Ontario-raised beef, lamb, goat and veal to process and create ready-to-cook halal burgers, kebabs, meatballs and specialty cuts.

Parkhill Meats Ltd. knew its customers were looking for local halal products, so it matched the growing market with Ontario farmers and processors to meet the growing demand.

With funding provided by the Greenbelt Fund, the meat processing company invested in additional cooling facilities to increase product output.

They've been able to boost market access for Ontario farmers, opening the way for 41 farmers to market their livestock to Parkhill Meats Ltd. for their halal products. The investment boosted local food sales and purchases by more than \$1.5 million.

Feeding a growing food chain

Our country's changing demographics continue to shape our food choices. Meeting these consumer preferences at home by growing, producing and processing global flavours, opens our world to more cultural food options that benefits everyone.

Farmers have new crop and livestock options. Grocery stores are serving new customers with local food that's grown in Canada. And Canada's food system continues to innovate and diversify.

Innovative investments by organizations like the Greenbelt Foundation and the Greenbelt Fund are getting more local food options served up in Ontario homes.

For more information on the Greenbelt Fund or finding local food in your area, visit [GreenbeltFund.ca](https://greenbeltfund.ca).

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