

A sweet option for local potato farmers

Radiance variety shows promise for increasing Ontario's sweet potato production

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By Luke Edwards, Grimsby Lincoln News



Valerio Primomo, research scientist, vegetable breeding at Vineland Research and Innovation Centre has been working to develop a sweet potato variety that can be successful for growers and consumers in Canada. The Radiance variety shows much promise. - VRIC/Courtesy

After years of work, scientists at Vineland Research and Innovation Centre think they have a sweet potato variety that ticks off all the boxes to be successful in Ontario.

The variety, called Radiance, shows promise for Canada's climate and could help farmers here increase their share of the sweet potato market. Canadians, on average, consumer 1.5 kilograms of sweet potatoes every year.

In a partnership with Louisiana State University, VRIC tested upwards of 2,000 seeds in its search for a variety that works for Canada.

“So out of these 2,000 we’ve picked as Radiance the variety we want to commercialize,” said Valerio Primomo, research scientist, vegetable breeding at VRIC.

The Radiance variety offers many benefits for both growers and consumers. Chief among them is its shorter growing season.

“For some growers that’s a benefit, because they can harvest earlier so that they can reach the Thanksgiving market,” he said.

Traditional varieties of sweet potato wouldn’t be harvested in Canada and Ontario until into October, meaning growers would miss that important Thanksgiving market.

The earlier harvest also reduces the risk of losing your crop to frost and cold weather.

On the consumer end of the spectrum the Radiance variety grades out quite well against the traditional varieties like Covington and Orleans. Visually, Primomo says consumers may notice a brighter orange colour for the flesh, though otherwise the tubers looks similar to traditional varieties.

“Internally it does stand out because it’s a bright orange,” he said. And in taste tests the Radiance variety won out over competitors.

Amy Bowen, VRIC’s research director for Consumer Insights, said the good results in the taste tests could at least come in part from the colour.

“Colour is the most important attribute in sweet potatoes,” she said. “The majority of consumers are expecting that bright orange, uniform colour.”

So far Primomo says they haven’t seen any problems with pests, but that could be in part because the relatively low acreage of the Radiance variety.

Radiance has been licensed to a propagator, who will produce the cuttings or slips for farmers. Primomo says they should be able to produce between 10 to 15 acres worth of Radiance this year.

“And then next year the plan is 150 acres,” he said.

That’s still a drop in the bucket for the 4,000 acres of sweet potatoes that would need to be grown locally to meet the demand for consumers, but Primomo is confident they can continue to increase the amount of sweet potatoes grown in Canada to reduce reliance on imports.

At the same time VRIC researchers are working to develop a good variety, they’re also helping to develop the propagation infrastructure for growers. With our

weather in Canada propagation must start indoors in greenhouses, which increases the price point. However, having that Canadian propagation also means growers can get the cuttings earlier, and don't have to deal with getting the product across the border.

"All the current growers get it from the U.S.," he said, adding quality south of the border among some varieties and some propagators has slipped in recent years as well.

VRIC is working to get two or three more varieties to give growers more options.

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