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Decision-making tool takes guesswork out of new crops

Vineland's online tool lets prospective farmers decide if the crop is right for them



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Vineland Research and Innovation Centre (Vineland) has just launched a new microsite to help growers evaluate whether certain new horticulture crop types could be a fit for their farming businesses.

Specifically, the Vineland site addresses entry into what are called world crops: okra, Asian long and Indian round eggplant.

These are new crops to Canada, but key markets lie with immigrant communities particularly from South East Asia, as well as the changing palates of long-time Canadians.

In response to changing population demographics, especially in the Greater Toronto Area, growers seeking crop diversification, and retailers wanting to boost their locally-grown produce offering, Vineland launched its World Crops program in 2008.

After research involving consumers, farmers and retailers, okra and eggplant were ultimately selected as the two most promising crops based on potential volumes and growing ability in Ontario.

Part of Vineland's work has also involved identifying the best varieties of okra, Asian long and Indian round eggplant for local production. The research also determined best growing practices.

All the outcomes of Vineland's world crops research program have been consolidated into a single online resource available at feedingdiversity.vinelandresearch.com. Content includes information on which varieties can grow in Canada's cool, short-season



Asian long and Indian round eggplant are gaining in popularity in response to changing demographics and cosmopolitan consumer tastes.



Okra is an important staple in Southeast Asian diets.

climate, best practices to minimize costs, and production calculators to help growers estimate costs and returns for the three crops.

For new crop ventures other

than eggplant and okra, there are two additional online tools that can help farmers with the "do I or don't I?" decision.

The Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural

Affairs offers a crop selection tool for specialty crops on its site to help growers identify what options might work in their particular soils and climate zones.

It does not, however, address market potential and related factors. This tool can be found at www.omafra.gov.on.ca/CropOp/en/crop_selection_tool.html.

To bridge the business gap in the new crop decision making process, the Agri-Food Management Institute (AMI) launched its new crops tool Making a case for growing new crops last year.

Five online modules cover topics from marketing and customers to agronomics and cost of production to help growers determine whether a certain new crop is a good business case for their farm.

"The benefit of using both the AMI tool and Vineland's new site is that you can generate numbers for world crops and then build those into a broader new crop plan through the AMI modules," said AMI executive director Ashley Honsberger. "Our new crops tool combines financial, technical and planning components for new crop opportunities into a single tool."

The AMI new crops tool is available at www.takeanewapproach.ca/growingnewcrops.