Pear revival: Two new pears varieties developed in Harrow coming in 2021

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By Sharon Hill

A pear variety, the HW624, hasn't been named yet for marketing purposes but is part of a revival of the fruit in Canada. Vineland Research and Innovation Centre / Windsor Star

A blushing pear developed in Harrow is the newest variety expected to help push a pear revival in Canada.

By 2020 or 2021, consumers can expect to be biting into two new pears developed at the Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada Harrow and then Vineland research station in the Niagara region.

One of the varieties, HW624, is a medium- to large-sized, juicy pear with eye appeal — a red blush from the sun at harvest. It is about to begin the process to commercialization and follows a handful of pears developed originally in Harrow that could help Canada reduce imports and pitch its pears to the rest of the world.

“It really is kind of a rebirth for pears,” Lana Culley, director of business development at the Vineland Research and Innovation Centre, said Friday.

The centre is a private, not-for-profit company that took over the federal government’s breeding program for pears, peaches, nectarines and apricots in
2013. It has a request for proposals to commercialize the unnamed pear with a Jan. 13 deadline.

“We sent it to retailers as well as growers and marketers across North America that all know pears very well — and this one, we’ve had a lot of interest,” she said.

A disease called fire blight pushed many Canadian growers out of pears and production has dropped off dramatically since the 1980s. Now 90 per cent of the pears Canadians eat are imported. That’s $82 million worth of pears.

The beauty of the pears developed over decades in Harrow and then at Vineland is their resistance to fire blight. Culley said there are very few pear-breeding programs globally so HW624 and a handful of other pears give consumers something new and offer growers a chance to gain back production that was lost to the United States and South America. Culley said it could eventually put Canada in the position to export pears.

“There’s a lot of excitement globally around pears,” Culley said.

Breeding programs cost hundreds of thousands of dollars a year and take decades of crosses to develop a new variety. The original cross for HW624 was in 1988. Most of the new varieties developed at the Harrow/Vineland program are sold as Bartlett pears in stores but one new pear that remains firm and stores well is sold as Cold Snap.

“With Cold Snap we went from no trees in the ground to 75,000 between 2010 and today,” Culley said. “We haven’t seen adoption like that of a new variety coming out of Canada in a long time, if ever.”

County Road 50 fruit grower Doug Balsillie of The Fruit Wagon said a little red blush on fruit is highly desired by consumers. “It’s very exciting. It’s good news for the industry.”

The first trees of HW624, which will be named by the group that commercializes it, could be planted this spring and another variety, HW623, will be planted next year and producing fruit by 2021. The centre is still evaluating 80 to 100 selections so more new pears could be on the way, Culley said.

Pears are not a top-of-mind fruit for consumers but Canadians do eat a fair amount of them, about two kilograms or more than four pounds of pears per capita a year.