

The Availability of More Diverse, Local Food Reflects Our Multicultural Population

Bok Choy is just one of a number of Asian vegetables grown in Ontario

Submitted by the Ontario Federation of Agriculture (OFA)

Ontario is the most multicultural of Canadian provinces with half of all new immigrants choosing Ontario as their home. As the demographics of the province evolve, it stands to reason that farmers are growing food that reflects the ethnically diverse appetites of Ontario consumers.

One perfect example of this is the availability of Ontario-produced Asian vegetables like bok choy, Chinese cabbage (nappa), mustard cabbage, water or Chinese spinach and Chinese broccoli (kale). Such vegetables are native to central Asia and are frequently used in the cuisines of China, Thailand, Vietnam, Korea, Singapore and the Philippines.

Ontario farmers grow more than 50 per cent of Canada's total Asian vegetables, almost all of it on land in the Holland Marsh area north of Toronto.

What were once limited to small "mom and pop" specialty stores in large urban centres, these dark leafy Asian greens are finding their way onto many grocery store shelves including those in the large chains. Why?

Consumers are more educated than ever and understand both the nutritional and economical value in supporting locally produced, fresh food. Ontario's growing ethnic population is placing more demand for food that is native to their culture. The desire to eat healthy is evidenced by large, busy store produce sections. Today's consumers are also more eager to try different cuisines and add new flavours to their diet. TV programming is certainly playing

an important role as chefs of all backgrounds create dishes with ingredient lists that span the alphabet – from A to Z and back to A!

While the Holland Marsh region is a major growing area for Asian vegetables, research is taking place to explore other areas of the province that could potentially support new crops. For example, the Simcoe Campus of the University of Guelph, Department of Plant Agriculture, has almost 90 hectares of land on the edge of the Norfolk County sand plain in Ontario's central Erie region. The operation undertakes research programs covering vegetables, fruits, and various alternative crops for the sandy soils of the area. Studies also include the feasibility of potential, non-traditional crops like Asian vegetables as alternatives on local tobacco farms.

What to look for when buying fresh Asian vegetables

Like other dark leafy greens, Asian vegetables are good sources of Vitamins A and C and potassium. When shopping for vegetables such as bok choy and nappa, look for firm dense bunches with unwilted leaves and smooth stems. Chinese broccoli should be a bright colour, have flexible stems and similarly, the heads should not be wilted. It is a good idea to wrap the vegetables in plastic and store them in your refrigerator crisper to keep them fresh. Use them within a few days of purchase.

One rule of thumb when cooking with Asian vegetables is to think in seconds. You will find that for stir-fries or steaming, the leaves will cook in about 30 seconds while the stems take just a few minutes. The vegetables can be added to almost any dish – from salads and soups, to meat dishes and as ingredients in spring rolls. Flavourings like soy and oyster sauces are great ways to liven up Asian vegetables, and ginger, garlic and hot spices can bring that extra zip to the dish.

Foodland Ontario is a good resource for local produce and recipes. To learn more, visit <http://www.foodland.gov.on.ca/english/vegetables/asianveg/index.html>