



# Tomorrow's tomato

**I**t is Canada's second most popular fruit and vegetable, right after the banana, and Ontario growers and processors are working hard to make sure the tomato continues to pack a healthy punch along with a zesty taste.

"Ontario tomatoes are a great natural source of lycopenes," says Gord Surgeoner, president of Ontario Agri-Food Technologies Inc. (OAFI) of Guelph, Ont. "They are recognized as important, disease-fighting anti-oxidants.

"Growers and processors are constantly developing new strains that increase those benefits both in fresh tomatoes and to preserve them in processed foods like tomato-based sauces."

OAFI is at the heart of the action. The Guelph-based company's job is to ensure the province's food producers have access to the latest technology from around the world and to support development of new markets for foods.

Greenhouse tomatoes are a shining example of success in both arenas. Mr. Surgeoner points out that Ontario is the largest supplier in North America of greenhouse vegetables and that its tomatoes are already playing a major role in fighting heart disease. It is the lycopenes that do the trick, he says.

"In 1998, when processors added lycopene to grains, the rate of spina bifida and neuroblastoma, a pediatric form of cancer, fell by 50%," he says. "We are now looking at a new purple tomato, developed in Britain, which has shown impressive results preventing heart disease in rats."

Equally important research is leading to new ways to preserve those lycopene

and other health benefits in the processing stage.

"We have to understand how to extend those health benefits. Bio-availability is the key. There is no point having lycopenes in processed foods if they simply pass through the body."

That is where the province's tomato growers come in, says Kirsten Callow, general manager of the Ontario Greenhouse Vegetable Growers Association, based in Leamington, Ont. Provincial tomato producers fall into two groups: those who grow field tomatoes – a seasonal crop – the bulk of which goes to processing plants, and those who grow almost year-round in huge greenhouses.

About 99% of all greenhouse tomatoes – from beefsteak to tiny cocktail varieties – reaches consumers through fresh fruit and vegetable stores and the produce departments of supermarkets, she says.

"To give you an idea of demand, Ontario has 1,750 acres of greenhouses or about the same as 1,300 football fields," she says. "Of that total, 1,500 acres are in Essex and Chatham counties in southwestern Ontario."

And those greenhouse producers are enormously productive. They produce about 160 pounds of tomatoes a year in a space the size of the average bathtub.

"Equally important, every grower is devoted to doing continual research," she says. "We are constantly improving the health benefits of tomatoes and creating new strains that maximize them."

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