



Ontario asparagus comes out on top

It is time to celebrate Ontario asparagus. Those slender, elegant green or white stalks are now known to contain high concentrations of a natural anti-oxidant called rutin, a natural disease fighter and a chemical compound even linked to longevity.

"Rutin in asparagus is thought to be one of those disease fighting chemicals," says Dr. David Wolyn of the department of plant agriculture at the University of Guelph. "And, as it happens, a study from Japan showed the Guelph Millennium Variety, developed right here at the university, had the highest concentration of rutin of any variety of asparagus sampled."

Scientists there looked at varieties of asparagus grown around the world and Guelph Millennium, the kind most often planted here, came out tops.

Dr. Wolyn is now applying for grants to take that study even further. His goal is to investigate if soil or environmental conditions and a host of other factors make a difference in rutin concentrations.

"It may eventually lead to looking at ways to optimize that rutin concentration during cooking and processing," he says. "The end result can benefit all Canadians."

Brenda Lammens knows all about the health benefits of Ontario asparagus. She not only grows 50 acres of the vegetable on her Spearit Farm, about 14 kilometres south of Tillsonburg, Ont., she is also the chair of both the Ontario Asparagus Growers' Marketing Board and the Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Growers' Association.

"We always suspected as much but now

we know it is a wonderful vegetable that not only tastes great but delivers terrific natural disease fighting protection," she says. "What we are doing now is investigating new ways to promote asparagus and to find other uses for it as well."

About 106 Ontario farmers currently have 2,600 acres under cultivation dedicated to asparagus. The two most popular varieties are Guelph Millennium and Jersey Giant. The bulk of the crop, which starts popping above ground in late spring and is available for only six weeks a year, goes to fresh vegetable counters at food stores.

"We have begun shipping Ontario asparagus to a Michigan plant for canning as well," Ms. Lammens says. "Last year, we sent 1.4 million pounds for processing. This year, we hope to double that."

The growers are also sponsoring pilot projects to quick-freeze individual spears and to turn the trimmed and discarded butt ends into a form of flour. "You get all kinds of pizza crusts these days, so why not a healthy asparagus crust," Ms. Lammens says.

Her advice is that if children turn their noses up at asparagus imported during the off-season to try them this spring on fresh Ontario asparagus. "They will be amazed by the difference. Our fresh Ontario product is so crisp and crunchy, it is a special taste treat," she says.

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