



The wonders of the soybean

In Asia, it has been the mainstay of great nutrition and good health for thousands of years. Now in Canada, the humble soybean is fast being recognized as a kind of wonder food: not only for its versatility and high fibre, protein, calcium and Omega-3 fatty acid content, but also for a broad range of health benefits now being understood by science.

Best of all, Ontario's over 25,000 soybean growers are credited with producing some of the finest quality beans in the world — so valued that close to 20% of the two million tonnes grown each year are shipped to Japan, a country where the soybean is nearly a cultural icon.

“What research is finding is that the benefits of Ontario soybeans extend far beyond nutrition,” says Dr. Alison Duncan, a professor and researcher in the human health and nutritional sciences department at Ontario's University of Guelph. “We are discovering it can have a positive impact to help prevent conditions such as heart disease and diabetes, among others.”

The secret lies in something called phyto-chemicals. Soybean plants produce them to protect themselves when they are stressed. Researchers are finding that those protective compounds can be reinforced through selective breeding of specific strains of soybeans, then harvested and turned into compounds that give the same benefits when ingested by humans.

“I have been involved with one research project working with a soybean breeder to produce soybeans rich in isoflavones,” Dr. Duncan says. “We then created bread from the soybeans and were able to prove that people who ate it absorbed the isoflavones.”

The next step, she says, is to track the effect those isoflavones have on disease risks.

“There is already evidence that suggests it helps diabetics protect themselves against heart disease, which is the largest killer of those suffering from the disease,” she says.

But the health benefits are just one part of the soybean's fast-growing popularity, says Mary Wiley, manager of Soyfoods Canada and communications manager for the Ontario Soybean Growers. She points out that more than 27,000 new food products containing soybeans have been introduced between 2000 and 2007.

“That includes 161 last year alone,” she says. While the most popular are cooking and salad oils and soy-based beverages, soybeans are also making their way into snack foods, breads and even frozen desserts.

Soy products are gaining in popularity in cooking. Ontario-grown soybeans are not just a dietary fad anymore. They have become part of smart, heart healthy eating patterns,” Ms. Wiley says.

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