



Possibility grows here.

Opportunities for Growth: Ontario Sweet Potatoes

It might surprise you to learn that sweet potatoes, a sub-tropical crop, are grown right here in Ontario! Based on the national average, Ontario consumes over 15,000 tonnes of sweet potatoes every year. During the harvest and post-harvest season, you can find local sweet potatoes in many retail shops. During the off-season, demand is met by US imports. While our climate provides some challenges, there are many opportunities to expand Ontario's sweet potato sector.

SWEET POTATO PRODUCTION IN ONTARIO



Ontario growers produce approximately 10,000 tonnes of sweet potatoes annually: relying on only 10 to 15 small and large-scale growers.



Local growers supply approximately 51 per cent of Ontario's sweet potato consumption.



Farmers have been growing sweet potatoes in Ontario for at least 20 years. Grown predominantly along the sandy northern shores of Lake Erie, Ontario growers produce approximately 10,000 tonnes of sweet potatoes annually: relying on only 10 to 15 small and large-scale growers. These farmers supply approximately 51 per cent of Ontario's sweet potato consumption.

To grow sweet potatoes in Ontario, farmers must plant sweet potato slips, which are the small green vines that grow out of a sweet potato when it sprouts. They are planted in the spring to ensure the crop reaches full maturity by the end of the growing season. These slips are first field grown in the US and shipped to Ontario farms due to our unfavourable climate. Once harvested, most sweet potatoes are prepared for retail, with some destined for processing.



SWEET POTATO EXPANSION OPPORTUNITY

Ontario production could expand to replace most imports throughout the year, doubling Ontario's current production levels!

Once sweet potatoes are cured, they can be stored for up to a year. This provides Ontario growers with an opportunity to not only replace imports sold in Ontario, but to expand and replace imports to other Canadian provinces.



Ontario's most recent annual production volume of just over 10,000 tonnes was grown on approximately 1,500 harvested acres, resulting in a yield of 6.5 tonnes per acre. A hypothetical 20 per cent expansion in production implies an additional 313 acres of sweet potatoes harvested, corresponding to an additional \$2 million in farm value.

This would result in Ontario's production volume increasing to approximately 12,000 tonnes, which could meet 79 per cent of Ontario's total consumption.

WHAT WILL ENABLE EXPANSION?

Ontario must be able to profitably grow, store and ship sweet potatoes into distribution centres at prices near US import values. Expansion opportunities for sweet potatoes are limited unless Ontario growers can offer a supply to retailers at a competitive price. For instance, imported sweet potato slips are an additional cost not experienced by US farmers. An Ontario supply of these slips would need to be greenhouse-grown by plant propagators. Ontario growers would also benefit from access to crop protection materials used in the US that are not registered for use in Canada. These products result in higher yields, less product downgrade, and higher per acre revenues, enabling US growers to maintain low production costs.

The following actions would enable Ontario expansion:

- Cultivar selection and/or a plant breeding program focused on higher yields and/or a shorter growing season to lower per unit cost.
- Access to crop protection materials used by US counterparts.
- Growers and/or marketers having a critical mass of sweet potatoes to supply the requirements of major food retail accounts.
- Retailer support for Ontario-grown sweet potatoes.
- Ongoing promotion by Foodland Ontario of Ontario-grown sweet potatoes.

Read the full report, *Plant the Seeds: Opportunities to Grow Southern Ontario's Fruit and Vegetable Sector* by JRG Consulting Group: www.greenbelt.ca/planting_seeds