

The heartnut: A healthy heart in a nutshell

Valentine's day is in February, which is also "National Heart Health Month". What better time to introduce a little known nut cultivated in the Great Lakes Region of Ontario that is shaped like a heart both inside and out.

The heartnut is being studied by Dr. Rong Cao, a food chemistry specialist at Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada's Food Research Program in Guelph, Ont. Dr. Cao is researching the identity of nutraceutical and functional compounds contained in the heartnut.

Facts about the heartnut

- The heartnut is shaped like a heart. The flesh (nut) has a pleasant, sweet walnut or butternut-like taste.
- The heartnut is a genetic oddity (that happened by chance in the shape of a heart) from traditional breeding. It came about by traditional breeding from a Japanese walnut using grafting techniques. The grafting is to improve the cold hardiness and disease resistance by grafting the heartnut sapling to a hardy unrelated root-stock.
- Many of the antioxidant compounds identified in the heartnut by Dr. Cao's studies are present in higher quantities than the commonly-consumed walnuts.
- Antioxidants are proven to scavenge free radicals in the human body that are implicated in diseases such as coronary heart disease and cancer. A particular compound, gamma-tocopherol, which is a component of Vitamin E, is present in substantial amounts in heartnut. Gamma-tocopherol has been proven to be effective in reducing chronic cellular inflammation that has been linked to some forms of cancer and aging.
- The nut has also been found to be low in the "bad" fats, saturated fatty acids.

Dr. Cao is also studying other antioxidants in the nut known as polyphenols. He is researching the fatty acid profiles particularly "good" polyunsaturated fatty acids

that the nut contains.

Considering recent developments in heartnut breeding and cultivation even better quality, higher yielding heartnuts with improved nutritional value are just a matter of time according to Dr. Cao.

The heart nut is grown only in the Great Lakes Region of Ontario. There are a few growers in



Michigan close to the Great Lakes.

Growers currently cultivating heartnuts have plans to increase capacity. The crop is commercially available but owing to the relatively small amount produced at present, the nuts are sold only at the farm gate in Ontario close to the production sites.

Heartnuts were bred to crack easily without shatter and to maintain their heart shape with a smooth sweet taste. As breeding continues the plan is to increase the nutritive and functional or nutraceutical components to make the nut an even more valuable source for antioxidants and polyunsaturated fatty acids.



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