

## Issues & Answers

AN IN-DEPTH LOOK AT THE NEWS AND THE NEWSMAKERS

# Growing a slice of Asian life

*Vegetable farmers face unique set of challenges in Ontario climate*

BY MIKE ADLER  
STAFF WRITER

Every two or three days, fuzzy squash from Sid Yu's farm in Bradford arrives at Golden Food Mart in Market Village, a shopping centre in Markham.

On a corner tray you see them — tending to light green, weighing a pound apiece and left with little of the fine, soft bristles that give the vegetable its name.

Beside the fuzzy squash (called tsit gua in Cantonese) are the white Chinese radishes and shrink-wrapped sections of winter melon, which is fuzzy squash left to mature.

Across from the four men trimming, wrapping and bagging vegetables are some staples of the Chinese kitchen: Nappa cabbage, baby bok choy (known as choy sum), baby mustard and Chinese broccoli (gai lan).

Two strange-looking items behind you are bitter melon (fu gua, which is eaten fresh as a meal or dried as a herbal medicine) and Chinese okra (si gua, which is not a true okra but looks like one in its ridged, leathery skin).

Never seen these things before?

Since they are also used in Vietnamese, Korean and Japanese cooking — and familiar to many other cultures — you might be tempted to try some.

These Asian vegetables, and plenty of others, are grown this time of year in York Region and south Simcoe County, close to steady customers in the Asian markets and restaurants of Toronto, Markham and Mississauga.

Their total acreage in the area has quadrupled in the past five years, said Jim Chaput, an Ontario agriculture ministry vegetable specialist in Guelph.

Like many others, Yu, originally from southern China, decided to grow vegetables in Bradford because of its rich soil and convenient distance to Toronto.

But starting a crop this spring on a new farm (his second in four years), he was unprepared for the cool May weather that almost killed his young squash plants.

"In China, I know how to grow the mao gua," he explained, using the Mandarin name for the fuzzy squash. "But in new place, large problem. Very different.

There are other difficulties, including



STAFF PHOTO/MIKE ADLER

Farmer Sid Yu proudly holds a mature fuzzy squash, called a winter melon, grown on his one-acre farm in Bradford. Yu is among an increasing number of farmers who are growing Asian vegetables in York Region and south Simcoe County.

pests.

"When the plant was very young, the insects bite it hard," said Yu, crouching to show evidence of the damage.

Compared to farmers of more conventional crops, Chinese and Vietnamese growers around the Holland Marsh find it more difficult to control pests because the vegetables they grow are unfamiliar to Canadian experts.

Compounding the problem is the fact immigrant farmers are hard to contact to

teach pest-control techniques.

"They're new to this," said Chaput, noting Chinese vegetables were once raised as "trap crops" to draw pests away from others. "The crops are very vulnerable."

Yu has his acre of fuzzy squash growing from wooden supports six-feet high, "like the English people grow cucumber," and is proud of this innovation.

His winter melons grow on the ground nearby to 20 pounds each.

Growing Asian crops has become a popu-

lar and competitive business. If a supermarket buyer spots an insect bite on a vegetable, the farmer can lose everything, said Hector Hoo-Fatt, director of Grand Mart in Agincourt.

"If the quality is bad, they have to dump it," he said. "Everybody wants the best of the best."

Many farmers specialize in only one vegetable — choy sum, for instance — because if the quality is good, it could get a higher price.

Normally, Hoo-Fatt's market buys vegetables harvested in California, Florida or the Caribbean from a trading company.

But in the summer, it can purchase them directly from farmers at Toronto's food terminal.

Only a few — lotus root and water chestnut among them — must be imported from the Far East year-round.

"Ontario has provided the vegetable diet for all communities much, much cheaper during the summertime," Hoo-Fatt said.

Gai lan, or Chinese broccoli, is usually the most expensive and sells for almost \$4 a pound in winter.

But in the summer, Hoo-Fatt can have it on special for 99 cents a pound.

The variety of cabbage-like or cucumber-like greens at local Asian stores is not easy for new customers to understand, especially since the vegetables are sometimes poorly labelled for English-speakers or not at all.

If you ask a Cantonese-speaking grocery worker for a fuzzy squash and call it a mao gua or a ho bak (its Korean name), he likely won't know what you want.

In a Chinese market, you might also look for "pumpkin" and be shown a Chinese squash called nam gua.

"We call it pumpkin, but it's not the same pumpkin as for Halloween," Hoo-Fatt said.

Chaput and the ministry are developing a fact sheet on Ontario-grown Asian vegetables, with their different names, uses and known pest problems.

The draft document says Chinese okra can be used like zucchini.

Hoo-Fatt said bitter melon is popular with East Indians and Filipinos, and can be stir-fried with black beans, chicken or pork.

Yu says the immature squash are called mao gua because the word mao sounds in Mandarin like the word for hair.

To eat fuzzy squash, Yu suggested to first peel the skin, slice it lengthwise and cut into small sections.

But unlike the cucumber, it must be cooked.

93

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