



 **CANADIAN**
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Growing fresh vegetables all year round

Growing in a green way



Canada

Picture eating a sandwich in the dark days of winter that features freshly grown PEI tomatoes, lettuce and cucumbers.

In the not-too-distant past, that would have been considered a pipe dream. However, Atlantic Grown Organics is now growing a host of vegetables all year round at its greenhouse in Spring Valley.

The latest addition to the production line is a pint weight packing machine purchased with financial assistance from the federal and provincial governments under the Canadian Agricultural Partnership (CAP). This is in addition to support received through the CAP for greenhouse expansion and machine learning technology.



Owner, Marc Schurman explained the machine is used to weigh, pack and label pint-sized containers of grape tomatoes. Previously, the operation had been packing manually, making it hard to obtain a precise measurement. As well, the new *Safe Food for Canadians Act* requires a date stamp to indicate when the product is packed, in the event it needs to be traced.

“We really didn’t have any packaging with that capability before,” Marc said.

The new machine, which arrived at the farm in the spring of 2020 just as the world was entering the grip of COVID-19, sees the tomatoes fed into the system at one end and emerge seconds later in labeled containers ready to be boxed up for shipment.

Workers keep a close eye on the line and any cartons that don’t close properly or don’t appear to be quite full are taken out of the system and weighed. It seems even machines are not infallible.

“There was a little bit of a learning curve and COVID meant we had difficulty getting a technician to the province to make adjustments to the machine,” he said. “However, I think we have most of the kinks out now.”

The company had previously purchased another machine that performs essentially the same function for the larger tomato crop.

The third-generation farm installed lights in the greenhouses in 2014, meaning they have been able to operate 12 months of the year. They also established the greenhouse to take maximum advantage of sunlight even during the winter months.

“The artificial light only produces about one-tenth of the light you would get on a bright, sunny day,” he explained.

The company has a workforce of 18 temporary foreign workers and six local workers and family members who are kept busy picking the tomatoes and preparing them for market. Marc explained it typically takes five weeks from the time the grape tomatoes are established in the greenhouse until the fruit is ready for harvest.

“For the full-size tomato plants, it is about seven to eight weeks,” he said. “We are picking in the greenhouse four days a week.”

The business ships product to regional chain stores and also sells at the farmer’s markets in Charlottetown and Summerside. They also sell to Island restaurants, have a roadside stand during the summer months, and have community supported agriculture customers throughout the year.

The greenhouse has undergone several expansions over the last five to seven years. The operation is certified organic, so beneficial insects are the major method of pest control.

“Essentially we use good bugs to eat the bad bugs,” Marc explained. “For tomatoes, we use *Encarsia formosa* to eat up all the small but destructive white flies.

“For cucumbers, we use *Phytoseiulus persimilis* to get the pesky spider mites and *Amblyseius cucumeris* for thrips that bite the cucumber flowers and fruit. If they do need to spray for something, we use a certified organic registered product.”

The operation also sourced a clean technology boiler from Europe that provides 100 per cent renewable heat using biowaste from the nearby Nature’s Crop plant in Kensington.

“Being able to grow local organic vegetables in a “green” way is certainly rewarding,” he said.

