

NPF & VGA Award of Merit

BY JEANINE MOYER



Jayasankar Subramanian, the 2024 Niagara Peninsula Fruit & Vegetable Growers' Association (NPF & VGA) Award of Merit recipient, is described as a passionate person who is admired by the tree fruit industry.

A professor of tree fruit breeding and biotechnology at the University of Guelph-Vineland Campus, Subramanian is based at the Vineland centre and has been breeding tree fruit varieties for nearly 25 years. He's also the only peach breeder in Canada.

"Prof. Subramanian has been incredibly instrumental in providing Canadian growers with varieties that work in our climates and help extend our seasons," says Douglas Darling, NPF & VGA vice president. "Over the years he has provided the industry with great research in many areas, most notably in black knot and of course, stone fruit breeding."

Subramanian is best known for developing three new Ontario peach varieties that have transformed the industry – Vee Blush, Early Blush and Rising Sun.

His fresh market peach breeding work began in earnest in 2008 when a local peach canning factory closed, forcing the provincial tender fruit industry to evaluate the future direction of peach production. At the time, Subramanian was tasked with developing new early-season peach varieties that could be grown in the Niagara region to capture the local market. He was fortunate to have a

stock of genetic material he inherited from a former colleague, and it didn't take long before Subramanian created exactly what the industry was looking for.

"It can take between 15-20 years to release a new tree fruit variety," explains Subramanian. "The process requires a lot of patience and luck along the way."

Vee Blush was the first variety released in 2015. It quickly became popular with growers and represents nearly 40 per cent of early peaches grown in the Niagara region today. The most recent varieties, Early Blush (released in 2020) and Rising Sun (released in 2022) were also adopted by growers right away and are becoming very popular.

Grower uptake is important, but it's consumers that drive the fresh fruit market. Subramanian explains that "consumers have to like the peaches for producers to grow them." That's one of the reasons why his research and variety development program consults with the tender fruit industry and growers every step of the way. This makes Subramanian's peach breeding program the only one in the industry that involves growers at every step, including in-field testing and consumer consultation.

"This is the most robust breeding program. By involving industry and grower representatives we can be confident our varieties will do well in the market," says Subramanian.

Working closely and collaboratively with growers and representatives of the tender fruit industry, Subramanian has put Niagara peaches on the map. And there's more to come. Subramanian is excited about a new type of peach variety he's developing, affectionately calling it the 'neat peach'. A firm-flesh peach with enhanced freshness, flavour and extended storage and shelf life, neat peaches are expected to hit the market within the next 10 years. Once again, Subramanian worked with the entire value chain to identify that younger consumers want a juicy, flavourful peach that isn't as messy to eat, while growers want a peach that will hang on the tree longer when fully ripe and distributors need peaches with an extended shelf life.

"My goal is to help the Ontario tender fruit industry leave a mark on the world," says Subramanian. "The sky is the limit when it comes to peach breeding, maybe someday I can even send an Ontario peach to space!"

NPF & VGA's Award of Merit is presented each year to an individual or individuals who have demonstrated commitment and dedication to the agricultural industry. The Award of Merit was first introduced in 1957. 🌱