

Greenhouses give us welcome winter miracles

In harsh climate, being able to grow tasty crops all year round is a boon for every Alberta consumer

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There's nothing quite like a freshly sliced cucumber, a juicy tomato, or a crisp red pepper to brighten up a dreary cold day and make you feel that spring is just around the corner.

You can thank Alberta greenhouses for some of that midwinter relief.

The province's greenhouse industry is one of the most innovative in the country, and the vegetable production sector has shown real leadership in expansion and diversification of products.

For consumers this innovation means that we can enjoy a larger selection of locally produced fruits and vegetables — even in the winter.

VEGGIES & GLASS

Got a Window? Grow a Herb!

If you have a window, you can grow fresh herbs. An indoor herb garden provides flavour, fragrance, and sometimes even flowers.

"Mint and parsley do well in a cool window, but basil needs a warm window in order to grow and thrive," says Marles.

"Rosemary is probably the toughest and most forgiving herb to grow."

Make sure to turn your plants, especially if they are on the windowsill, to provide them with even lighting conditions. For best results, don't crowd pots too close together and mist your plants occasionally. When it comes to watering, it's best to let marjoram, oregano, sage, bay, and thyme dry out between waterings. Mint and scented geraniums thrive under moister conditions.



Eric Doef wears gloves in his family's greenhouse to ensure his crops are safe for consumers.

DEBBIE OLSEN PHOTO

Unfortunately, it is impossible for greenhouse growers to produce some fruits and vegetables at certain times of the year.

"The chief limiting factor for growing greenhouse vegetables during the long prairie winter is not the cold temperatures, it is the lack of light," explains Helen Doef, owner of the six-acre Doef's Greenhouses west of Lacombe.

"You can always make heat, but the lack of light makes it impossible to grow a crop at certain times of the year."

To deal with low winter light levels, the Doef's recently installed a special lighting system in their greenhouses. The lighting system meant the fami-

ly-run greenhouse was able to produce winter cucumbers from December to February this past season. It was the first time in Alberta history that locally produced winter cucumbers were available.

"People love fresh locally grown vegetables," says Doef, who sells cucumbers, tomatoes, and peppers at Edmonton's Old Strathcona Farmers Market and other markets.

"Our energy costs have risen with the addition of the lighting, but we're hoping consumers will choose locally produced vegetables over imported ones, because they are fresher and higher quality."

Besides the farmers markets, Doef's cucumbers, tomatoes, and peppers

are sold in Edmonton grocery stores under the Pik-N-Pak label.

Fresh Herbs

Herbs are the magic ingredients that transform an ordinary meal into a savoury feast by enriching the taste and aroma of the raw ingredients.

Most chefs agree that fresh herbs are better than dried ones, but with Alberta's cold winters, fresh winter herbs have been costly and difficult to find.

Fortunately, you can always find fresh herbs at Edmonton's Old Strathcona Farmers' Market thanks to Greg Marles, of Morinville Greenhouses. Marles operates a year-round booth at the market, selling fresh and potted herbs grown in his greenhouse.

Tomatoes, peppers, lettuce and green beans are back - check your local Farmer's Market.

"Some herbs like oregano, thyme, and tarragon are seasonal, but many of them can be grown year-round," says Marles.

"We grow mint, basil, dill, Italian parsley, and rosemary throughout the year. Most of the herbs are grown hydroponically, which means there is only water and nutrients and the plants grown on top of the water."

Marles also supplies fresh herbs to a number of local chefs, and sometimes sells fresh herbs to the Italian Centre Shop.

"There is a real demand for fresh herbs because they impart better flavour and aroma," Marles says.

Potted herbs are also very popular at the farmers' market.

DID YOU KNOW?

▶ Alberta's greenhouse industry is the fourth largest in Canada, contributing about \$140 million in revenue to the economy and employing more than 3000 people.

▶ Bedding-plant production comprises the bulk of the greenhouse industry with vegetable production close behind.

▶ Greenhouse production has increased 90 per cent in Alberta over the past decade.

▶ Peppers, cucumbers, and tomatoes are Alberta's most popular greenhouse-grown vegetable crops, but you can also find lettuce, green beans seasonally, and herbs year-round at farmers markets and at grocery stores in Alberta under the Red Hat or Pik-N-Pak label