



GWILLIMDALE FARMS

Carrots have traditionally been viewed as a generic commodity but the team at Gwillimdale Farms, led by 4th generation grower and President John Hambly has been working diligently to change this.

Their switch to vegetable production came in the 1990s, leaving behind a focus on grains and dairy. The initial goal was to increase gross revenues per acre to combat the challenges associated with urban encroachment; and higher value vegetable production appeared to offer that solution. With their home farm upland of Bradford, just outside of the Holland Marsh, John and his team began growing carrots and onions. John found that the mineral rich soil produced sweeter, more flavourful carrots but their appearance wasn't quite as smooth as those grown in the peat soils of the Marsh so packers were docking his crops.

Never deterred, John with his partner and wife, Cristina decided to invest in the facilities to pack their own produce, under their own brand and develop opportunities based on taste, consistent quality and integrity. Packing their own carrots began in 2005.

To reduce costs and maintain product integrity, Gwillimdale Farms has also developed relationships directly with its customers to keep their supply chain efficient and effective. Rather than work through distributors or logistics companies, they connect directly with their own customers and most of their deliveries are made using their own fleet of six semi trucks. "We've seen products go through five different people before they reach the end consumer," Hambly says, referring to traditional distribution channels. "It's our product, and we want the control."



Becoming one of Ontario's largest growers, packers and shippers of fresh root vegetables is not enough of a differentiator for the team at Gwillimdale Farms though. Gwillimdale has also set itself apart from competitors through sustainability initiatives, offering a diversified range of root vegetables and proactive consumer marketing.

From good agronomy such as crop rotation, cover crops and using waste to create a natural compost, to investments in new technology to save energy and prevent waste, the list of their improvements is lengthy. Solar panels power half of their packing facility, wash water is cleaned without chemicals using a RO system, and innovative new storage facilities feature the most up to date climate control which significantly reduces energy use and helps maintain freshness for the produce stored. The management team continually travels the world to research new opportunities to improve.



GWILLIMDALE FARMS - CONTINUED

Many of their competitors focus on one or two types of crops but Gwillimdale Farms produces five, including carrots, onions, potatoes, beets and parsnips. Offering this range helps to set them apart and they have developed equipment and techniques to clean, sort and package several types of crops using the same equipment, rather than having dedicated lines for each.

Their team is also unusual among their peers, in that they conducted secondary and primary consumer research to guide their new packaging design and rebrand that was recently completed. This gave them a deeper understanding of consumer usage and attitudes towards fresh root vegetables, specifically carrots. These insights further reinforce their position as a trusted trade partner, and also supports their consumer communications program which includes a growing social media presence. Their Gwillimdale Farms label appears in grocery stores, restaurants and food service companies throughout eastern Canada and the eastern United States.

Their latest challenge has been an expansion into northern Ontario. In 2017, the company purchased 800 of black peat-type soils near New Liskeard. This expansion is important to the continued future growth of the business, which according to Sales Manager Quinton Woods, “has already experienced growth over 20 percent per year for the past several years.”

With more than 85,000 square feet packing facility, 85,000 square feet for storage and a full-time staff of 35, Gwillimdale Farms ships produce to customers in Canada and the USA year-round. They process and pack vegetables for five neighboring farmers who work to the same high standards, and they have partnered with similar family operations in Georgia, Mexico and California to provide customers with steady supplies of carrots, beets and onions in the late spring months before their Ontario crops are available.

Learn more about life at Gwillimdale Farms online: www.gwillimdalefarms.com and find them on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and Pinterest.

