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Canola — Canada custom-designs an oil seed for the world market



Agriculture Canada

Fields of brilliant yellow canola blossoms stretch for acres under Alberta skies. Today Canada leads the world in production and technology with this unique form of rapeseed.

Beneath Alberta's summer skies, fields of brilliant yellow canola blossoms stretch to the horizon. As the plants ripen, long, narrow pods fill with canola seeds so tiny that 15 of them laid side by side would not measure the length of a standard paper clip. These little seeds have a fascinating history.

Canola is a new, special form of rapeseed, an oilseed that has been known for centuries. While some countries have long used rapeseed as a source of edible oil, Canadians used it only to lubricate machinery until the early 1950s. Then, new export opportunities for Canadian rapeseed appeared, leading eventually to a significant agricultural genetic revolution.

Traditional rapeseed contains an abundant amount of the long-chain fatty acid, erucic acid, a nutritional disadvantage that limits rapeseed's use as an edible oil. The same type of problem applies to the glucosinolate content in rapeseed meal. When the potential for export opened up, the federal and provincial governments, university researchers, industry and innovative farmers decided to do something about these natural disadvantages and the rapeseed revolution was under way.

By 1978, Canada's rapeseed was so radically altered and improved it needed a new name. "Canola", roughly meaning "Canadian oil", was adopted. The choice seemed appropriate because canola was rapidly becoming the nation's most important and popular edible oil. Today, Canada leads the world in production and technology with this unique, more wholesome form of rapeseed.

At present, up to 95 per cent of the rapeseed grown in Canada is double-low canola — low in erucic acid and low in glucosinolate. The rest is grown in response to the market for higher glucosinolate rapeseed used in industrial chemicals such as paint. Says Robert Prather, section manager for crop and horticultural development with Alberta Agriculture, "The fact that we've gone from 100 per cent non-canola rapeseed to less than 10 per cent non-canola in so short a time is the true miracle. Increased production and yield are very significant, but the important factor is that we've almost completely changed the crop — from rapeseed to canola."

Alberta is Canada's canola province. In fact, Alberta accounts for 44 per cent



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