

*This is a copy of a letter Gary Johnston wrote to a colleague in 1998. It tells the story of Yukon Gold in his own words.*

Re: Yukon Gold

A little bit about what led up to its “creation”. In this century and earlier many Dutch and Belgians came to Canada. Many settled in the Lake Erie area called the “Banana Belt”, the principal towns being Simcoe, Leamington and Harrow. Later many settled in the Bradford-Holland Marsh after it had been drained. These new Canadians became mainly vegetable growers – potatoes, onions, carrots, sweet corn etc.

Since I took over the potato work at O.A.C. in 1953 the CDA Station at Harrow became one of the Potato Regional Variety Trial Centres. Soon growers in the so-called Banana Belt (a species of banana actually grew on Point Pelee) began petitioning for the breeding and licensing of a yellow-fleshed potato variety like they had “over home”. Back then I wasn’t really sure that we needed a yellow-fleshed potato in Ontario. However in the late 1959’s we had a graduate student from Peru whose father had a large plantation in the Cuzo region of the Andes east of Lima. I had a couple of talks with him about potatoes in Peru. He told me that the natives (Indians) in his area grew some varieties, small in size and quite rough, that they sold in the open market in Lima. They had a deep yellow flesh and a distinct flavour. The shopper in Lima considered them a delicacy. On his next trip back to Guelph he brought me a few tubers. They were indeed quite “tasty” when cooked.

A year or so later at a PAA convention I met the late Roman Ross from Wisconsin Potato Introduction Station. I asked him if he know about these Peruvian potatoes and he replied that they had some a Sturgeon Bay, that they were know as amarillas and had manes like Careta, Yema de huevo, etc. He offered to send me some but suggested I use a couple of the 2x hybrids. One of those that I received was W5289-4 which was a 2x cross between Yema de

huevo and 2x Katahdin, the former being of the *S. phurja* species. W5289-4 had quite rough tubers, smallish in size but deep yellow fleshed. So the "sheels" began to turn in my brain. Why not try to create a potato variety with normal size, shallow eyes, globular shape and yellow flesh. To attempt this I chose Norgleam from North Dakota which had excellent shape and size, very early and had attractive appearance. This cross was made in 1966. To my surprise true seed was produced and G6666 was "born". It was from the 66th cross that year. In the first field tests of the family of sibling # 4 was retained for further testing and multiplication. So G6666-4y moved into regional trials at six locations for 3 years. It came up for licensing in 1980. I suggested the name YUKON (for the Yukon River and gold rush country) and Charlie Bishop suggested we add the word Gold so it officially became YUKON GOLD. To succeed I believed that Yukon gold would require good publicity. Harrowsmith, a national magazine published an article I wrote called "There's Gold in these hills". Shortly after I was asked to do several interviews for TV and radio. I did one for a radio station in Yellowknife, N.W.T. Later the magazine American Vegetable Grower did an article "Yukon Gold goes upstairs" with the front page coverage. The biggest boost came when 2 large Ontario growers printed YUKON GOLD in large letters on their very attractive 10 lb paper packages sold in many supermarkets. This enabled customers, if they like the product, to come back and ask for the same variety by name.

Last summer I was asked by the Horticultural Science Department at the University of Guelph to give an interview re: Yukon Gold to a free-lance reporter from California. She informed me that this new potato variety was rapidly increasing in popularity in CA especially in restaurants. Much of CA's seed potatoes was grown in Oregon and B.C.

A number of years ago I received a request for some seed tubers from the Sakata Seed Co. of CA. I passed this request on to Bud Wright. He sent some tubers of Yukon Gold to Sakata. They indicated they would likely send some

seed tubers to their home base in Yokohama, Japan. I have no word if Yukon Gold has been distributed in the Pacific rim or not. I recently wrote to Sakata in CA but got no reply.

I am afraid I do not have listings, dates, etc. of where "my" varieties are now grown abroad. The exception is the Scandinavian countries. To save further writing I will send you a copy of my letter from Sweden from Prof. Jari Valkonen. I agree it would be very worthwhile to have a history of Canadian-bred potato varieties introduced and grown abroad. Contacting foreign embassies and the Agricultural Attaches might be helpful. I did have a letter from an Australian official re: Trent. A French fry company near Melbourne was contracting it out for their French fry production.

I am sorry this is so rambling. This is the first time I have written about the situation etc. which prompted me to try and produce a useful, yellow-fleshed potato variety which at least would be welcomed by our new Canadians from Europe.

Gary Johnston

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