

VALUE-ADDED

Flax oil developers believe art market is game changer

Improvements to flax-based paint could allow company to tap the Canadian and U.S. art market worth more than \$100 million

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Martin Reaney was faced with a conundrum.

He had created a non-bitter flax oil that nobody wanted.

It wasn't until he visited an artist friend that he had his eureka moment for what to do with it.

The story begins 15 years ago when Reaney, a University of Saskatchewan plant scientist, decided to find out what gives flax oil its bitter taste.

He discovered it was a compound called peptides.

"It was a bit surprising because peptides aren't supposed to be in oil," he said.

Reaney and his research team figured out how to get the peptides out of the oil and discovered they had a valuable product on their hands.

He set up a company called Prairie Tide Chemicals Inc. to research what could be done with the peptides.

The research has shown peptides have a profound impact on reducing gut inflammation, so it is believed they can be used in medicine to treat diseases like Crohn's, colitis and ileitis.

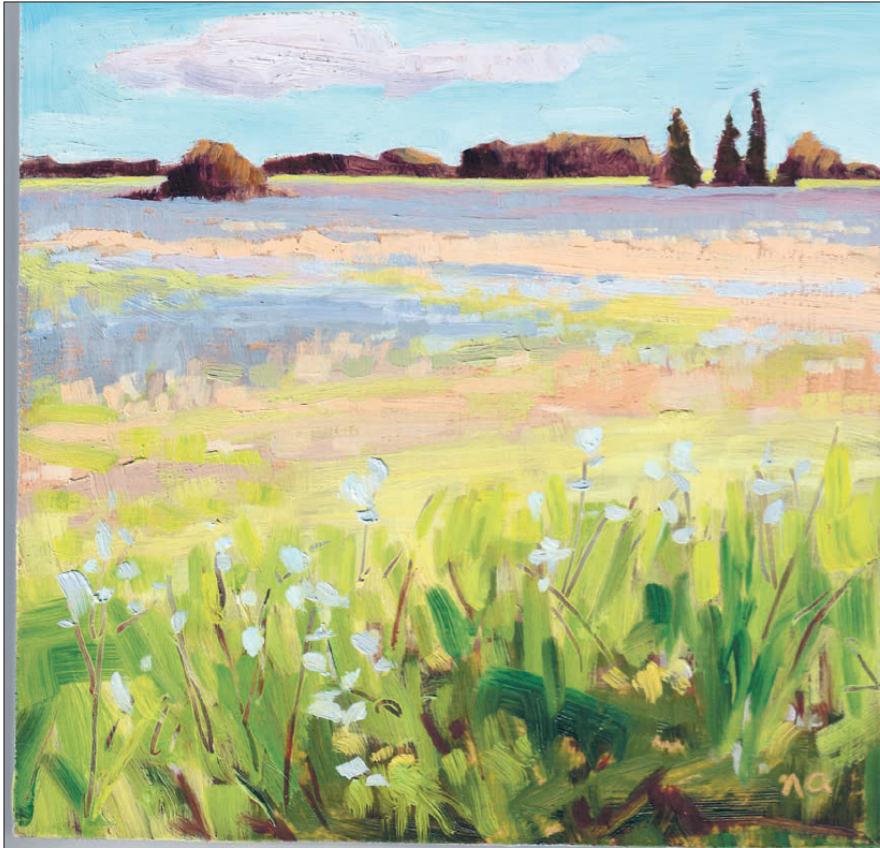
They are effective in suppressing certain types of cancer tumours and can even be used to create light-emitting diodes for flat screen televisions.

But the application that is likely to be commercialized first is an anti-aging compound in cosmetics.

"We're working with (companies) on the ability to hopefully make people look younger and more beautiful," said Reaney.

Prairie Tide Chemicals uses the pilot-scale processing plants at POS Bio-Sciences and the Bioprocessing Pilot Plant at the University of Saskatchewan to isolate the peptides.

The byproduct of the process is a



Canadian artists such as Nicki Ault incorporated a new non-yellowing flax oil into their traditional flax-based paints to see if the product lived up to its billing of reducing odour, eliminating yellowing and minimizing dry time. | NICKI AULT PHOTO

sweet flax oil with no bitter taste that is somewhat like canola oil.

Reaney was convinced he had a highly marketable byproduct because it was a source of omega-3 fatty acids that was more palatable than regular flax oil.

The problem is that the vast majority of flax oil is sold in the organic section of grocery stores

and Reaney's sweetened flax oil is not considered organic because of the way it is processed. He also discovered that people who buy flax oil have grown to like the bitter taste.

So, he had to figure out something else to do with the oil. The answer came when he was visiting an artist friend who loved working with flax-

based paint but complained about the odour and the way the white and bright colours would eventually turn yellow.

"The penny dropped with me then that the odour and the colour had to be coming from these peptides," said Reaney.

He reworked the peptide extraction process to produce a non-yel-

lowing, non-odour producing flax oil.

Reaney then approached Paul Trotter, owner of Hues Art Supply, to see if there would be a market for the oil in the art world.

Trotter distributed the oil to 150 artists across Canada through various independent retailers and asked them to provide feedback.

The artists used the oil to thin their existing flax-based paints.

The initial feedback has been positive. In addition to reduced odour, it appears to have solved the yellowing issue, and the drying time is vastly reduced. It used to take up to a month before artists could paint over top of flax-based paints.

"We anticipate our new made-in-Saskatchewan product will spark renewed interest in oil-based art," said Trotter.

He said it is hard to get a true read on product performance because artists are mixing the oil with traditional flax-based paints.

They won't know the full impact of the flax oil until they start producing and selling their own paint, which is in the works. The first two colours should be available within six months.

Trotter said the market for flax oil in Canada's art community is about \$150,000 compared to \$10 million for paints. The U.S. paint market is estimated to be worth more \$100 million.

He believes they can make inroads into that "massive market."

"When you come forward with something that is all the way around better — doesn't yellow, dries faster and has less odour — that's a real game changer for that market," said Trotter.

Prairie Tide and Hues Art Supply have formed a company called Martin & Paul that will produce the oil and paints that will be sold and distributed through Hues Art Supply.

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