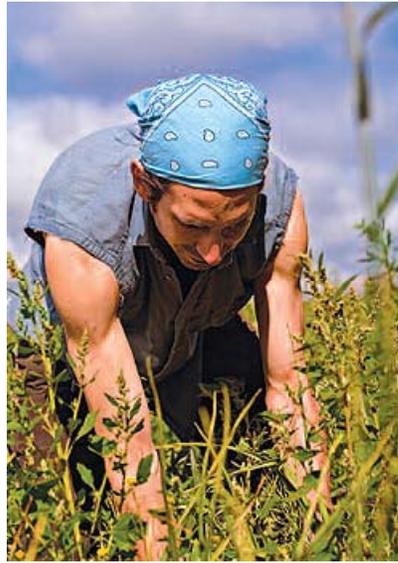


## LIVIN' ON THE VEG



Above: Daniel Hoffmann

BY LORRAINE JOHNSON Photography by Laura Berman

Daniel Hoffmann hands out two different business cards: one reads “Organic Farmer” and the other, “Wellness Counsellor.” On one is a drawing of a garlic bulb which, on closer inspection, reveals impressions of the seven continents on the cloves; on the other is a circle divided into colourful sections labelled "emotional," "spiritual," "mental," and the like. After spending time with Hoffmann, it occurred to me that his two cards actually serve as one: his farming is wellness and his wellness is farming – and a global vision encircles them both.

When I first met Hoffmann in the depths of a January chill, there was no dirt under his fingernails. But his farming roots were evident when he offered me a bag of garlic containing five global varieties (Korean, Yugoslavian, Italian, Ukrainian, and Russian) out of the twelve he grows. Garlic is his specialty, one of the things that sets him apart. Another is that he lives in downtown Toronto and commutes to his farm north of the city near Brampton, on land he rents from FarmStart (an organization that helps people get into farming). And to top it off, he's got a Bachelor of Social Work degree and is looking for ways to combine his farming work with his counselling career, though in an informal way. He practises a branch of counselling I'd never heard of before: food coaching ("I think I made the term up," he says. "You don't see it in the Yellow Pages."). The term rolls easily off his tongue in conversation.

Hoffmann introduced spiritual matters into our discussion with similar ease. Within minutes of meeting him, I used the word "faith" (as in, “I just need to have faith that such and such will happen...”), and he slid into this offhand opening, asking me if faith

is a part of my life. He took my answer – "I believe in compost" – in stride, and we were soon talking about cycles of returning and transforming, about a shared passion for garden metaphors, and about the way in which the language of gardens and growth grounds our worlds.

Hoffman has long been involved in the food and farming worlds. After completing university, he farmed on Vancouver Island for three years. (It was there that he met heritage grower Dan Jason, who introduced him to many different garlic varieties.) Farming mixed vegetables, he co-ran a CSA (community supported agriculture) program composed of four farmers feeding forty families, and had an independent food-box program, as well. When he returned to Ontario, he worked at FoodShare as the coordinator for both youth programs and urban agriculture. With this varied experience under his belt, he returned to hands-on farming last year.

Rather than going the solo route with his vegetable farm (which he named The Cutting Veg), he has created a community enterprise where volunteers and interns share their labour in exchange for produce and training. The Work Bee volunteers show up (or not; there's no pressure) on Sunday mornings throughout the growing season to help prepare the beds, turn the compost, plant the rows, weed the inevitable, and generally cultivate growth. In return, the volunteers are free to help themselves to the bounty – salad greens, peas, beans, potatoes, onions, beets, carrots, kale, chard – they subsequently harvest. During the farm's first year of operation, Hoffmann had anywhere from two to ten regular volunteers. "I couldn't have succeeded without them," he admits.

The internship program being introduced this year is based on a less casual arrangement. Each of the ten interns commits to a minimum of ten farming hours per week from April to October and in return receives well-rounded training in the basics of organic agriculture. (Taking vegetables home is also part of the agreement.) "It's ideal for people who are rooted in the city," explains Hoffmann, "but who want to take a significant step in the farming world." Carolina McDonald, one of the Work Bee volunteers last year, was the first to sign up as an intern for the 2009 season. "The interns and volunteers," says Hoffmann, "[are] all here for different reasons, some for wellness, some to grow their own food. Everyone always has a good time.... If it's possible for small-scale organic farms to be financially viable, [then] this is an important piece of it." The participants clearly agree; Hoffmann turned away twice as many interns as he could accept, and he invited them to be volunteers instead.

Spurred on by his success, Hoffmann has expanded many aspects of his enterprise for 2009. The area in cultivation has doubled from one acre to two. And along with the volunteers and interns, he's planning a Growing Opportunities Program, through which autistic youth will help out on the farm. "My vision," he relates, "is to cultivate a quadruple bottom line: personal, social, economic and environmental health. Farming is a great way to bring all those things together."

Hoffmann's goal of economic health is perhaps the most challenging of his four pillars: "I often tell people that organic farming is a wonderful lifestyle – but a lousy business."

He acknowledges that "last year was not financially successful," but he plans to focus more on the financial end of things this year and seems excited rather than daunted by the prospect: "It's fun to be an entrepreneur and be creative about generating income. I love numbers, and running your own business is all about numbers."

But there's more to it for Hoffmann. When I ask what inspired him to plant all these different types of garlic, from Persian to German, his answer stands as potent impetus for all of his work, from The Cutting Veg to his counselling, to the many workshops he leads: "I'm all about unity and community. This is a way of promoting unity and community and respect and diversity - [and] to celebrate that diversity. Garlic is a metaphor for the way that we're all pretty similar, with subtle differences."

To me, this sounds like an opening to return the conversation to spiritual matters, so I shamelessly hint that I'd love a bulb of the enticingly spiritual-sounding Tibetan garlic.

## GROWING GARLIC

Plant cloves (unwrap the papery outer layers but retain each clove's thick skin) in the autumn, two to three weeks before the first anticipated ground freeze. Plant with the end of the clove (the part attached to the bulb) downwards, 6 inches apart and 3 inches deep, in rich, well-drained soil.

Cover with mulch, such as straw.

Harvest in late July.

Dry the bulbs for one to two weeks, then cut the stocks off an inch above the bulb.

Can be stored for months.

For more in depth garlic planting instructions, visit [www.thecuttingveg.com/global-garlic/how-to-grow-garlic.html](http://www.thecuttingveg.com/global-garlic/how-to-grow-garlic.html).

Hoffmann sells produce from The Cutting Veg at two farmers' markets in Toronto: the Green Barn (Saturdays) and Sorauren Park (Mondays), and through his Tikkun Adamah CSA in Vaughan. For more information on the workshops he runs (such as Planning Your Organic Veggie Garden, Vermicomposting and Intro to Preserving the Harvest), visit [www.thecuttingveg.com](http://www.thecuttingveg.com).

Lorraine Johnson's new book, *City Farmer: Adventures in Feeding Ourselves*, will be published in the spring of 2010 by Greystone Books.

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