

## Growing food helps connect urban and rural neighbours

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Early Sunday morning, nine people pack into a grey van near Bathurst St. and St. Clair Ave. and head north to where the houses stop and the farmland begins.

Their destination is the McVean Farm, a 20-hectare slab of land in Brampton that's cultivated by more than a dozen people.

But the rows of vegetables and herbs are easy to miss.

The northern-most crops bump against a subdivision of houses. The road hugging the land is being widened to make room for the development, the construction obscuring the farm's sign and entrance.

"In some ways, it's hard to think there's a farm here," said Andrea Peloso as she crouches beside a row of potato plants, yanking out weeds by hand.

She is among a team of interns working for The Cutting Veg, an organic enterprise run by Daniel Hoffmann that rents 1.6 hectares on the McVean lot.

Today, people like Hoffmann are trying to reconnect urbanites to the farm, and in doing so, re-establish the farmer as a neighbour — one not defined by proximity, but by a common, more intimate connection — food.

It's an attempt to alter the decades long trend that has seen farms grow into massive operations often sending food to farflung locations while at the same time suburban developments gobble up valuable farmland.

Small-scale operations like Hoffmann's have found a niche that lets them concentrate on community building as much as growing produce.

"There is a renaissance going on," said Karen Landman, a University of Guelph professor who focuses on urban agriculture as well as rural planning and development. "It shows you how short our memory is. These things used to exist. It was how we fed ourselves."

Markham town Councillor Valerie Burke, who co-authored a contentious plan to become the first GTA municipality to freeze expansion onto prime farmland to create a permanent local food belt, credits the divide to poorly planned development over the past several decades. As more arable land was paved over with sprawl, those moving into the new subdivisions had fewer interactions with the food system.

Many urbanites "tend to see the rural landscape as urban-in-waiting. It's just waiting to be developed," Landman said.

The seeming incompatibility between the rural and the urban was compounded by the explosion in the size of farms over the past several decades, she added. The provincial government encouraged farmers to enlarge their operations if they wanted to remain economically viable.

According to the Ontario Federation of Agriculture, the average farm ballooned to 450 hectares from 45 hectares. The bigger farms brought bigger risks. Some operations, concentrating on single crops, went belly up after a string of bad seasons. The farms that did succeed, however, were geared toward selling their products at a large-scale level, often exporting the food to other countries to be processed, Landman said.

"No one ever meets the farmer, especially if they're exporting their products," she said. "That connection is easily lost."



Daniel Hoffmann harvests garlic scapes at The Cutting Veg, an organic enterprise he runs near a subdivision in Brampton. Hoffman is trying to reconnect urbanites to the farm, and in doing so, re-establish the farmer as a neighbour.

CARLOS OSORIO/TORONTO STAR

Peter Lambrick understands that disconnect. Each year, the 59-year-old farmer cultivates between 325 and 405 hectares in and around Milton, most of it grains and oil seed bound for Asia.

His grain operation involves little interaction with the “in-town workers” who are buying plots close to his own home. When he’s moving his equipment, he said he’s often treated as a disruption to his neighbours’ “fast-paced” urban lives.

“Unfortunately, my relationship with them, unless it’s through my wife’s roadside stand, is non-existent,” he said. “Quite often I am an interruption to them hurtling up and down the road because I’m only travelling at 20 kilometres an hour and they think the 60-kilometre speed limit is too low anyway. So I get a lot of fingers flicked at me.”

Despite the flashes of road rage, he has noticed a rising appreciation for local farmers. At a policy level, Halton has approved plans to preserve a network of environmentally sensitive green spaces, and there is support to “make it as easy as possible for the farmers there to continue farming there,” he said.

“It sends a signal to agriculture, ‘Yes, you are a big part of what we are,’” he said.

And it’s a signal that’s becoming increasingly common across North America, said Landman, who recently completed a 20,000-kilometre trip through the United States and Canada touring urban farms.

Most notable is Will Allen — an urban agriculture pioneer — who has turned his city farm in Milwaukee into a booming enterprise with a \$2 million budget. He plans to eventually produce about 10 per cent of what the city will eat.

“He sees food as a vehicle for community development,” Landman said.

Hoffmann subscribes to a similar philosophy with The Cutting Veg.

The son of an accountant and a psychotherapist, he didn’t have much experience with farms growing up in Toronto. In fact, he developed an interest in farming after getting a degree in social work. He wanted to be part of social change.

The venture has what he calls a “quadruple bottom line:” to cultivate social, environmental, economic and personal health through organic agriculture. Part of that includes connecting to consumers directly through Community Supported Agriculture programs.

About 150 residents around the GTA own shares in the Hoffmann farm. Once a week during the harvest, they will use a point system to select their weekly allocation. They meet the people who worked in the fields. They connect with their local farms, Hoffmann said.

Yet what motivates people to pay a premium for food from a local farm?

The reasons vary, Hoffman said. Fanny Henebo, a volunteer with The Cutting Veg, wants to know where her food comes from. For Peloso, another volunteer, it’s about supporting an environmentally sustainable food system.

And for others, it’s as simple as doing right by your neighbour.

“You’re supporting your neighbour, so to speak. It’s your local farmer. It’s the right thing to do,” Burke said.

While the small, neighbourhood farm is romantic, it’s not a realistic business model for agriculture in Ontario, said Bette Jean Crews, president of the Ontario Federation of Agriculture.

“I think when people see that nice, warm fuzzy old McDonald’s farm look, they forget that agriculture right now requires some serious investment, education and business management skills to carry it off,” she said.

Farming in Ontario is diverse, not just in crops but in plot sizes. And it’s important for urbanites to support that diversity, she said.

“Your readers want to read about going back to two or three pigs and 10 chickens. Traditional old farms like they came from,” she said.

“That might be one option for some people. But I can tell you, I raised four kids and could not have done it on the income of that.

“Agriculture as a business has changed. It doesn’t mean we have to lose that stuff, and there’s still people who want to do that, but it’s not a profitable business and farmers are business people.”

While profits are important to Hoffman, they’re not the only thing that motivates him.

“To me, this is a very community-oriented exercise,” he said.

The proof might be on the field. Peloso chats with a field hand in the neighbouring row. The topic? The farm they’re helping cultivate — and the fresh vegetables they will be eating later that day.

“We’re developing friendships, relationships based on the most universal connecting thing in the world — food,” she said. “It’s totally community building.”