

Albion Hills Community Farm epitomizes farm-to-table freshness

Written By MARK PAVILONS

There's something special about enjoying the fruits of one's labour.

When your efforts land on your dinner plate in the form of freshly picked vegetables, it's awesome.

Nowhere is the farm-to-table concept more alive than Albion Hills Community Farm, a 17+acre oasis nestled behind Albion Hills Conservation Area. The Farm is a place where residents can grow their own fruits and vegetables, on the 50 or so allotment plots. It's much more than a labour of love for growers; it's evolved to become an experiential learning centre where young people and students can get their hands dirty. The non-profit operation encourages people to come together and learn about local food production and conservation practices. It is the reason why 'community' was embedded in the name.

On the two-plus acres set aside for plots, residents from across the GTA flock to the Farm to tend their gardens. Plot sizes start at 200 square feet and are rented for a nominal annual fee.

People choose the plots for many reasons. They may not have the space at their home, or the ideal soil and sun conditions. Crops tend to flourish at the Farm.

The plots are tended by people of all ages, from young couples to seniors.

Launched in 2011 in partnership with their landlord, the Toronto Region Conservation Authority (TRCA), the Farm allows everyone to 'experience' food, according to board chair Karen Hutchinson. Students can fully immerse themselves in the process and experience the texture and taste, and leave with dirt under their fingernails. Hutchinson noted that for many young people who visit from urban areas, this is the first time they will be exposed to, and understand the growing process.

There's plenty to learn at the Community Farm about agriculture, conservation and ecology. The key to sustainable agriculture is teaching the future stewards and that's where the Farm's education programs come in. They offer a variety of on-farm and in-class learning opportunities. Adjacent to the Etobicoke Outdoor Education Centre and the Albion Hills Field Centre, the farm welcomes students from Toronto and across Peel each year to get a feel for sustainable practices.

'I think we can do a lot more with food and farming,' Hutchinson observed. There are so many opportunities to expand local agriculture within the system that already exists in Caledon, Headwaters and even around the world. We have strong agriculture roots in the area to build on and enhance. We are seeing a growing interest in food and an increasingly diverse demand.

'School food programs have taken off across the country as a way to educate our youth and support local farm fresh product. Agro and culinary tourism is big in Headwaters Region. It is important to have both a local food supply and to educate the next generation of farmers. Food and farming are also about health and wellness, land stewardship and of course they are an economic engine, especially when combined with the food and beverage industries. Focusing on food and farming is a great way to solve a lot of social, environmental and economic issues facing us today.'

The Farm sparks an interest in young people, and there are a few surprises along the way.

The Farm has found a way to nurture Monarch butterflies and give them a fresh, healthy start. They are Nature's monitors and their health is an indicator of the overall well-being of the ecosystem. Summer student Haley Cunneyworth of King oversees the Farm's Monarchs.

The Farm is also home to four chickens, which not only provide fresh eggs, but tend to excite the younger students who visit. In

June, they were at the Caledon Fair where they were welcomed by people of all ages. Resident "chicken whisperer" Skid Crease affectionately calls them his "golden girls."

Dotting the landscape are a few pollinator gardens, where important insects can find food and refuge.

A new hedgerow project is in its early stages and will soon be something to behold. With roots in the UK, hedgerows were originally created as natural property boundaries and ways to contain livestock. But they've evolved into aesthetically pleasing "homes" to various types of flora and fauna.

A resident beekeeper has helped the Farm set up some permanent hives. and the farm is starting a "hive share" program this summer.

There is a compost program with a worm composter that helps teach about soil health and food waste.

A huge bonus of the Farm is its idyllic scenery. After tending to their gardens, people can enjoy the calm serenity, or take a hike along the area walking trails.

There's a variety of produce grown at the Farm "more than 20 crops and 40 plant varieties "including basil, zucchini, peppers, ground cherries, tomatoes, greens, kale, cabbage, leeks, cauliflower, squash, pumpkins and garlic.

Hutchinson pointed out that Farm volunteers and students planted some 7,000 garlic bulbs last fall and the harvest is now on. They'll be celebrating this amazing veggie during their Honey Garlic Festival, coming Saturday, Sept. 28 from noon to 5 p.m. On tap will be food, activities and entertainment for the whole family.

Crease, a local plot holder, has a small section of his garden dedicated to the four winds, an homage to indigenous smudging practices. In this spot he grows wild tobacco, sweetgrass, sage and cedar. He offered up a taste of fresh stevia leaf and it was simply amazing.

The Farm grows in accordance with organic principles. Hutchinson said one of the biggest challenges is dealing with weeds and thistles. One way to mitigate the effects is through silage tarps.

If you don't have the time to tend to your own plot, the Farm welcomes visitors every Thursday from 12 to 7 p.m. at their market. You can take home a variety of produce, grown just steps away. You can't get any fresher than that!

The Farm is not fully built out at this point, so there are some great things coming.

Eating fresh off the land isn't just healthy, it's recommended. Canada's 2019 Food Guide now suggests half of your diet include fruits and vegetables.

"I think it's really important to grow our own food and learn about the process," Hutchinson said.

Albion Hills Community Farm is located at 16555 Humber Station Road, north of Old Church Road. For more, visit their website at <http://www.albionhillscommunityfarm.org>.