

Cultivating plum opportunities

by BROCK WEIR

Peach season is almost upon us.

?So what?? you might ask? Well, for this writer, it's the start of peak summer.

We all know the fruit grown here at home tastes all that much sweeter, whether it is a matter of flavours being retained better the shorter the distance between farm or table, or whether it's simply a matter of local pride. Vegetables might not have the same kind of sweetness, by and large, but somehow our local produce seems heartier when we have that local investment in it.

But, for me, there is always something special about peach season.

Maybe it's the fact I went a good long while enjoying what I thought a peach tasted like before I had the revelatory experience of tasting one picked fresh from a tree at a nearby orchard.

My first intro peach ?drink,? that powdery just-add-water concoction that tastes vaguely close to the real thing but just enough to trick your brain into thinking you just juiced a freshly picked peck of ?em.

My parents weren't under any illusions that there was anything remotely fruit-related here, but for a brief window of youth, my mom worked in a small coffee shop where the only age-appropriate beverage on the menu for this then-tot was that peach-concoction for which the paper envelope in which it was contained was the closest it ever came to a tree.

The flavour triggers powerful sense memory with me to this day, but, as I mentioned above, the first contrast between peach and ?peach? was nothing short of a game-changer. I could feel, if only in my mind, my tastebuds flare and my horizons broaden just that much more.

So intrigued was the contrast that I immediately started my campaign for a little garden plot of my own. The little patch I got on the side of the house didn't produce much, nor did the peach pits I planted germinate, but I proved a deft hand caring for tomato plants and took great pride in bringing the fruits of our collective labour inside to enjoy.

While these so-called kitchen gardens have always been popular when and where there is land available, I was heartened by the renaissance they appeared to enjoy when COVID-19 first arrived in Canada and we had precious little to do than enjoy and make the most of our respective corners of the world.

If you had the land, vegetable gardens saw renewed interest. If not, porch and balcony gardens took on new resonance. When public health restrictions began to lift, our local farmers' markets also saw renewed interest.

Aurora's market, for instance, set the benchmark for other similar organizations in opening to the public once again, albeit with some restrictions in place, and deftly pivoted each step of the way. Now that we're firmly settled into our not-so-new normal it, and its colleagues across the GTA, are still riding high ? not just as a place of commerce and a showcase of just what you can find when you Shop Local, but as a way to connect with neighbours, share ideas, and bring together like-minded people for a common cause.

As COVID eased, we've been all too glad to continue the benefits of Shopping Local as we all reap the benefits of doing so, and it's heartening to see. It's also heartening to see people still invested in exploring their local community and everything it has to offer. Something that, in my observation, may have seemed dull, boring or common place before benefited from us all having the precious gift of time to explore them for a full evaluation.

If there are any long-lasting silver linings that came out of the nightmare we all lived through, I'm glad that this newfound ? or, more accurately, re-found appreciation for amenities around us seems to have a degree of staying power.

But, at the same time, we can't allow ourselves to become too myopic.

As important as it is to emphasize and showcase our communities, we mustn't lose sight of thinking beyond ourselves in our day-to-day lives. Perhaps this is the tarnished flipside of a coin so singularly focused on the four walls that kept us safe during that difficult time and what lay just immediately beyond it.

Within school environments, for example, we have students who are more connected now than ever before. With the resources they have at hand, technological or otherwise, they're able to identify global problems and, with guidance from like-minded teachers, are, in turn, able to identify practical solutions to make a difference.

Smart phones, tablets, and the like, although sometimes misused in this school environment, have proved invaluable in facilitating these kinds of learning opportunities where you can connect with and learn from peers around the world with a single tap. These lessons can give you real-time and firsthand knowledge of the issues that matter in other parts of the globe and how they might be relevant here.

As students prepare for the school year ahead, they could face some age-specific restrictions on how they use the devices that have, for better or worse, become extensions of ourselves and our windows on the world. How they are used in these settings has indeed become a problem in some instances, but I can only hope these new restrictions are more flexible than they sound and are determined at the discretion of the teacher.

As someone who has repeatedly spoken out in this space about the dangers of seeking out echo chambers, particularly those found through social media, to justify or validate ideas rather than to seek out different perspectives or facts, it might seem counterintuitive to have qualms about restricting phone use in the classroom, but I'm a realist.

Advocates for these and even greater restrictions have claimed these devices, or, perhaps, more accurately the apps that have been downloaded to them have re-wired some young minds and altered the way they think so I can't help but think this could only exacerbate other problems.

That they have had such a profound impact is certainly a problem, but other apps also broaden horizons, from the opportunity to glean instant knowledge from a repository vaster than the world has ever seen, to apps that help the user manage stress and anxiety in the classroom and their lives in general, and stay connected with their family and peers ? something that proved a lifeline to so many of us when our worlds temporarily, but drastically shrank.

There is a degree of satisfaction, particularly at this time of year, of tending to your own plot of land, but don't lose sight of what's beyond your yard, balcony or window box.

Depending on where you are in the world, things might not be so peachy ? but staying connected, focused and having the tools you need when and where you need them can certainly make a world of difference.