

Heat, Hunger and Healthy Vegetables

by SHERALYN ROMAN

Three things are on the menu today: the heat is on, hunger is always an issue, and healthy vegetables are available now, fresh from gardens across Caledon. Summer for many is a time of escape: a chance to dispense with routine, go to camp or a cottage, take little day trips locally or farther afield, or simply bask in the sun. For others, however, summer changes nothing and may even make day to day existence more of a struggle, particularly during the extreme heat events like those we seem to be experiencing more and more these days. If you are able, perhaps you can help make a difference in the lives of those who find summer yet one more challenge to be dealt with rather than enjoyed.

Thoughts of summer being particularly hot this year got me thinking about winter, back to school and food supplies at the Exchange. I know ? weird, but that's the way my brain works sometimes.

While it's true many Canadians go into ?survival mode? in winter with only the thoughts of a beautiful summer BBQ on a beach helping them push through, for many others summer is no different from winter in terms of just trying to survive. Every Canadian home has some form of heat, but not everyone has air conditioning and I think we'd all agree that lately, the heat has been pretty unbearable. Seniors and young children, those with underlying medical issues, all are at risk and respite is hard to come by. Combine that with hunger and the heat isn't just unbearable, it's potentially downright dangerous.

Checking in with the Exchange, located at 55 Healey Road in Bolton, Caledon Community Services confirms what I anticipated to be true. With many residents lucky enough to enjoy a cottage or camping experience, donations to the Exchange tend to drop at this time of year.

Heading out of town for a break is wonderful, but it often means we've forgotten to consider a donation (food or monetary) to the food bank before we go. For those left behind relying on the Exchange for all, or to augment their weekly nutritional requirements, the bare shelves that greet them are demoralizing, yet another stark reminder of the different kind of summer they are experiencing. You can help.

Donna Cragg, Director of Communications and Marketing at CCS, shares that donations are typically down in the summer and this year is no exception. Additionally, summer presents a twofold challenge; not only are the shelves depleted, but CCS is ?challenged with building up the inventory of nutritious kids snacks to support the fast approaching back to school time that starts soon.?

Learning on an empty belly presents its own unique challenges. Here's what the Exchange is most in need of right now: canned soup, mac & cheese, cereal, oatmeal, peanut butter and staples such as flour, rice, and potatoes. My own little additional reminder stems from a lifetime of managing food allergies, wherever possible (and particularly for back-to-school snacks where it's a requirement) make sure those granola bars and similar products have a peanut free label on them!

There's also some good news to share about summer however, and that's where the reference to vegetables in the headline comes in. If you have a child registered in the Peel District School Board no doubt you already know about their wonderful veggie gardens, an initiative driven by School Trustee Stan Cameron and supported by parents, teachers, staff and of course, the children.

Checking in with Stan recently we learned ?all 16 Caledon public schools have a vegetable garden on site. Most are absolutely full of life, energy, (and) colourful vegetables.? These gardens, in my humble opinion (as the kids might say) are a fabulous example of what can happen when an idea is championed and a community comes together in support of it. They present teachers with curriculum and learning opportunities and give students a chance to truly learn about ?farm to table,? where food comes from, and what's involved in nurturing garden growth from seed to harvest. It may even set them on a lifetime path of growing at least some of their own veggies. Not only is this a wonderful thing, but it helps the Exchange and those who depend on it, too.

Mr. Cameron shared that the veggie program harvest is shared in three ways: ?anyone in the community can take whatever food they need,? and in at least seven of the local schools partial harvesting of items like lettuce, zucchini and cucumbers is already taking place, about which Stan says, ?we are happy that community members get access to these veggies.?

Additionally, teachers are invited, when school returns, to take ?some of the harvest into the school to teach their students what they can make from their school's garden harvest.?

Finally, the third way the bounty is shared is through the Exchange. Just last week, ?22lbs of fresh beets, radishes, multiple varieties of kale, zucchini, beans, peas and Swiss chard? (all from the Humberview SS garden) were dropped off at the Exchange and the week prior, proceeds from the Alloa PS garden were shared. It appears to me that this heat is good for one thing; if a garden is tended well, and watered regularly, the harvest can be shared throughout the summer months.

By PDSB sharing this bounty with the Exchange, everyone in the community benefits! Donna Cragg comments, ?the PDSB program that Stan is involved in is amazing - and that is a bright spot within Caledon's rich agricultural tradition.? She added, ?fresh produce from this program, CCS' Grow a Row initiative for home gardeners, and the generosity of local farm producers make a huge difference to Caledon residents who visit the Exchange.?

The heat is on and forecasted to hang around for a little while longer. No doubt fuelled in part by climate change (despite #47 and others who deny that it exists) and locally, by the potential impact of decisions concerning our environment (?Swan Lake? and other former pit rehabilitation efforts come to mind) the heat might have an enormous impact on Caledon residents for years to come. But at least for today, let's focus on what good can come from it.

Local school gardens are flourishing and that means donations of fresh produce are plentiful at the Exchange. As for the rest of the shelves, summer has left them bare. If you are one of the lucky ones and are leaving for a long weekend or summer trip to the cottage, consider scheduling a stop to drop off a donation to the Exchange along the way. Summer should be something everyone looks forward to.

(Ongoing issues with water, pits and environmental degradation continue. Opportunities for public input on two additional proposed ?changes to the site plan for a pit or quarry,? meaning the potential dumping of construction fill into existing water-filled quarries, are due on or before August 5. Visit the Environmental Registry of Ontario to learn more and register your opposition to the continued degradation of Caledon lands!)