

Vegetable gardens coming to Caledon public schools]

Trustee Stan Cameron, an avid gardener himself, is leading project

By Zachary Roman

Students' knowledge won't be the only thing growing at Caledon's public schools in the future.

Caledon's Peel District School Board (PDSB) Trustee Stan Cameron has announced that plans to implement vegetable gardens at each of Caledon's 16 public schools are well underway.

"It's been a vision of mine, pretty much since I (was elected) in 2010," said Cameron, who's now serving his fourth consecutive term as trustee.

Not long after he was elected for the first time, Cameron received a call from Barb Imrie, who's involved with the Palgrave United Community Kitchen. She told Cameron about a school in Scarborough that had a large outdoor garden, and that it could be worth a visit.

So, Cameron contacted the principal of the school and went for a tour of the garden. He said it was quite large, and garden boxes were built by the school's woodshop students. As well, the school's hospitality students used vegetables grown in the garden in their cooking and baking.

"It was an 'aha' moment for me that I never lost," said Cameron.

It's going to be a team effort to make the garden project a reality, and many have already stepped up to help. A local feed and farm organization is going to be helping with the seedlings needed, and Karen Hutchinson from the Albion Hills Community Farm is going to be supporting the project with her extensive knowledge. Staff from the PDSB's field centres will also be invaluable in the project's implementation, said Cameron.

So far, 13 out of Caledon's 16 public schools are set to have a vegetable garden, and Cameron's optimistic the other three will be on board soon. He's currently in the process of visiting each school for a parent council meeting, ensuring there will be support from the community to keep the gardens alive in the summer.

The current idea is to have each parent Council set up a schedule for the summer, with one family taking charge of weeding and watering the garden for each of the summer break's eight weeks. With this idea, families can still arrange to help even if they have a busy summer, so long as they have just one week free. Part of this plan also includes sourcing rain barrels for each school and keeping them full so there will always be water available for the gardens.

There are many ways the food from the gardens will be used, such as being donated to The Exchange, run by Caledon Community Services. The Exchange is where Caledon residents can go to receive food support, and fresh vegetables will be welcome there. The vegetables will also be used as ingredients in food made by high school students in hospitality classes.

Cameron said growing food to give it to those in need will be great for teaching students empathy and compassion.

Since he posted about the school vegetable gardens on Facebook, Cameron said he's received an outpouring of support. He said people have been messaging him on social media, texting him, and calling him to share support or ask if they can be involved.

"It really has been an exciting message for people on what we can do with property that already exists where children go to school," said Cameron. "We got lots of schools that want to do this and lots of staff within schools who want to be the champions of the project."

Cameron keeps a very large vegetable garden himself, and said he's extremely grateful for the privilege to be able to do so. He said it's his happy place and that being outdoors is a great place to be. Cameron said when his grandson visits and goes out to his garden, he loves to pick cherry tomatoes and eat them. Having children see how vegetables are grown helps them realize they aren't gross, but in fact delicious and good for you, said Cameron.

Another benefit of the vegetable garden project is that it aligns with many objectives in the Ministry of Education's curriculum for students, explained Cameron. It aligns with teaching students about healthy eating, as well as Indigenous studies and respecting the land. It also gets students outside, which benefits their mental health. Cameron said the fact the garden project aligns with curriculum goals makes it easier for schools to get on board and support it.

?I'm seeing that right now with the excitement for this,? said Cameron. ?I mean, it's a project that won't cost schools any money, but that can reap incredible rewards.?

The vegetable garden project is set to begin this spring.