

Community gardens gaining momentum thanks to the pandemic: York Region Food Network

If there is any silver lining to be found amid the global pandemic, one shining thread might be the renewed interest of individuals in growing their own food, according to the York Region Food Network.

Since the start of the COVID-19 outbreak, the York Region Food Network (YRFN) has seen wait lists to be a part of the five community gardens they run throughout the Region 'shoot up dramatically,' says Executive Director Kate Greavette.

People, she says, are once again looking at resources and opportunities close to home, particularly for public green spaces and green spaces 'for people to go and feel productive.'

'Food security has always been a question since Day One of this pandemic,' she says. 'The steady increase in growth has come from people being limited in the amount of spaces they have in their own back yards, their front yards, or on balconies in condo buildings. There is a desire to have more space that people can use and the idea that people want to get their hands dirty. They know that they can reach their own food security in a way, so the idea of growing lettuce or kale is something people have really been inspired by.'

'When we look at the last year, most of the seed companies reported they were in Year Two or Year Three of seeds. The demand for food greens seeds just shot up dramatically, so people were looking at home. I think this will be a trend that will continue to move ahead, people wanting to provide a little of their own food but also getting that outdoor benefit that gardens offer.'

This trend might be evidenced here in Aurora by the positive reception received in recent proposals to allot a portion of a new park on Hartwell Way for raised bed community gardens. In previous years, proposed community gardens in parks, particularly those within or close to neighbourhoods, have been the subject of significant pushback from neighbours citing the potential for pests and even aesthetics.

'I would hope that some of those concerns have been lessened,' she said. 'As we have seen, there are a lot of people who don't have access to outdoor space. When we're in times of crisis, outdoor space is just crucial for our mental health. To me, the solution to any of those tensions and dispelling any of the challenges that the neighbours or others in the community might have about community gardens is to make sure any community garden is resourced appropriately and well.'

If the community garden ultimately does become part of the upcoming park on Hartwell Way, municipal staff have suggested a garden modelled on a template similar to the YRFN's garden on Industrial Parkway South near Vandorf Road.

It is important, says Ms. Greavette to have it staffed or, at the very least, a contact point committed to building relationships amongst participants, all of whom will need to work together to address pests and keep it looking good.

'I think when people start to see the amount of community and social interactions that can be developed at a community garden, the positive mental health impacts that come to that, that is what is going to turn any naysayers. They are going to become believers in community gardens once they see that community good that can form. For me, that is not going to form unless there are resources and staffing dedicated to really being that community animator and investing in the space, but also investing in building relationships of people who are coming into and using that space. That is what is going to build respect for land, build respect for one another in community gardens, and it is what is going to keep the community gardens really well maintained.'

'Community gardens take a lot of forms and there are different ways to approach it. For us, a key element of success is making sure that the community garden responds to the needs and the wants of the community. It is not just about the food, it is the food and the social connections. Those have to go hand in hand. In designing these spaces, it has to be, 'How do we have the best food available to the most people?' and 'How do we also forge social connections, friendships and really build those neighbourhoods so they are

healthy, inclusive and vibrant???

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