

'Farmland is like an endangered species'; For farming to continue, B.C. must find ways for young farmers to make growing food products a viable career

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LANGFORD - Farmers dream of passing their properties on to their children. Norma Lohbrunner, 81, passed hers on to complete strangers.

"How do you compare land with money?" she says, propped up by a cane outside her white farmhouse with the vibrant rock garden. "I always knew this land was going to be saved."

Then she mentions the rising cost of food and jokes whether she made the right decision.

"I live on a pension cheque. I have no money at all. But I feel good about it. I'm grateful for the way things turned out."

Lohbrunner donated her 16-hectare farm to the Land Conservancy of B.C. on the condition she continues to live in the farmhouse, and that the half of the property that is rich bottom land be preserved forever for farmland while the half that is wooded hillside remain for nature.

The agricultural property has an official assessed value of \$580,000, but would fetch much more on the open market.

Lohbrunner has lived on the Victoria area farm on Lippincott Road since marrying her husband, Joseph, a nursery co-owner, in 1945. Over the years, the couple grew a wide variety of produce on the land, from potatoes to strawberries. Since his death in 1968, the land has been largely underutilized, and used mainly for hay production.

Today, the conservancy has leased the land to three young organic farmers -- Ian King, Perry Mickle and Marthinus DeWet, partners in Backyard Fresh Farming, a company that also grows vegetables in residential backyards and shares the produce with the property owners.

"The land is starting to come alive," says Lohbrunner, bracing against a cool wind as she watches a tractor till the dark soil. "What I like most is having the boys around. The three of them are just wonderful. You couldn't ask for nicer young men."

As The Vancouver Sun completes its week-long series into B.C. food production, the question turns to the future of farming in B.C and finding ways for young farmers to enter the field in the face of escalating property values, especially in urban areas closest to markets.

Just three per cent of B.C.'s land area is arable or potentially arable land; 19,844 farm holdings in 2006 covering 2.8 million hectares and producing 48 per cent of all foods consumed in the province. Given the production technology available today, about half a hectare of farmland, or six city lots is needed to produce the food for one person for one year, according to a provincial self-reliance report issued in 2006 by the Ministry of Agriculture and Land.

The consensus is that to survive in the future new farmers will have to look for niche markets, and practice intensive methods on smaller acreages that make the most out of the soil.

"I can't help but think about being in China and seeing how intensively they use the landscape," offered Art Bomke, an associate professor of agroecology in the faculty of land and food systems at the University of B.C. "Sometimes it's beyond sustainability, but in some cases it's been done that way for thousands of years."

He predicted that as rising energy costs make the cost of conventional agriculture and mechanization more expensive, farms will become more labour intensive. "While I don't see us going back 100 years, it is quite possible in future there will be more people on the land."

Farmers need niche markets

Growing local organic food for urban markets is certainly part of that niche trend. At the international level, the marketing of B.C. blueberries is viewed as a success story, although there are concerns that ongoing rapid expansion could lead to a glut. Even Agriculture and Lands Minister Pat Bell believes that much of the current crops being converted to blueberries will revert back to more traditional produce in the coming years.

Regardless of the crop, the high cost of land means that leasing property will increasingly become the modern reality for new farmers entering the field.

Moura Quayle, then-dean of agricultural sciences at the UBC, issued an independent report in 1999 for the province recommending in part an agricultural lands trust, but successive governments have failed to act on the advice.

The B.C. Agriculture Plan: Growing a Healthy Future for B.C. Families, released in February, promised only vaguely to "assist the agriculture industry with human resources, succession planning and new entrants."

That puts pressure on non-profit groups to take up the slack, similar to the American Farmland Trust in the U.S and the National Trust in England.

The land conservancy changed its mandate one year ago to include farmland protection alongside preservation of natural and heritage areas and is actively seeking donors

interested in bequeathing their farm properties or offering covenants to protect their land permanently for food production in exchange for charitable tax deductions.

"Farmland is like an endangered species," says Ramona Scott, the conservancy's manager of agricultural programs, in Victoria. "We're losing it."

Others farmers have created cooperatives as a way to buy land, in the Interior, Vancouver Island, and Lower Mainland.

The 40-member Fraser Common Farm Cooperative purchased four hectares on 256th Street in Aldergrove 30 years ago for \$70,000, adding another four hectares next door eight years ago for \$400,000.

"Today, the two properties are worth closer to \$2 million," allows Heather Pritchard, a founding member of the co-op and executive director of the group Farm Folk/City Folk. "We're talking about how difficult it is for new farmers to acquire land."

A second entity, Glorious Organics Cooperative, produces food on the two properties for sale to restaurants, farmers' markets, and under a "community supported agriculture" system by which members of the public ante up \$500 at the start of the season in exchange for weekly produce in the harvesting season.

CO-OP ALLOWS FOR TRANSITION

A mix of ages and experiences in the co-op allows for the transition from old to young farmers, but juggling so many competing personalities and visions can make the food growing look easy. "It's a challenge," Pritchard confirms. "It's harder to work together and farm together."

Land is one issue. Training new young farmers is yet another.

Among the current local options in the Lower Mainland are the Kwantlen University College School of Horticulture in Langley, the University College of the Fraser Valley agriculture program in Abbotsford, and UBC's land and food systems faculty.

This year, the Centre for Sustainable Food Systems at the UBC Farm is launching a 35-week part-time apprenticeship program that takes students -- from the general public, or those enrolled in the university's agroecology program -- through an entire growing season.

The course, modelled after a long-standing program at the University of California Santa Cruz, covers the range of farming activities, such as soil preparation, seeding, cultivation, harvest, and the business skills needed to determine markets for food.

Program coordinator Mark Bomford says the university for decades has concentrated on educating students to fill roles that support farmers, including policy makers, researchers and consulting agrologists, rather than to actually own and work a farm.

"It was possible to get a degree and never touch soil," he said.

The apprenticeship program gives students "the big picture" and meets a growing demand for farmers, not for conventional large-scale agriculture, but for organic and other smaller-scale operations that seek to grow produce to meet local demands.

One of the partners working the Lohbrunner farm in Langford, Ian King, received his horticulture certificate at Victoria's Horticulture Centre of the Pacific at Glendale Gardens in 2005.

He eventually found landscaping unfulfilling, and decided to pursue his passion for organic farming by working as an apprentice at Madrona Farm in Saanich.

At 24, King is less than half the age of the average B.C. farmer -- 53.

"I'm interested in eating what I grow," he says, noting his dream is bankrolled with \$30,000 from his parents in Calgary. "It's coming back. More people are interested in it.

"People have decided it's a viable way to make a living."

The Madrona Farm, operated by David and Natalie Chambers, on Blenkinsop Road is a familiar spot to Victoria residents. About six of the 11 hectares are actively farmed, producing more than 100 types of organic food weighing in at more 55,000 kilograms last year.

"There have been fights over carrots," Natalie says of the morning lineups.

The family even maintains a portable free-range chicken coop with fencing that moves around the farm on a rotation basis, its avian occupants eating insects while fertilizing the soil.

Despite their operation's success, Madrona Farm is at risk of collapse.

The three brothers who own it, including David's father, are poised to sell, but are giving the community -- through the Friends of Madrona Farm Society -- first crack at the purchase at the below-market purchase price of \$1.3 million.

If successful, the farm would be turned over to the land conservancy and leased back to David and Natalie, who measure their farm experience by only a few years.

David, 33, had been cooking at a Yukon highway maintenance camp when he decided to return to Madrona Farm in 1999 when his grandmother became sick.

He thought about homesteading in the Yukon, but the growing season couldn't match that of southern Vancouver Island. "I wanted to try my hand at farming. There's more room for mistakes down here."

It's been hard work, and a gradual process building up the diversified farm, with the immeasurable reward of eating an entire plate of food you personally produced. "There is something nice about growing food," he says simply.

Natalie notes she met her future husband on the other side of the produce stand, as a customer in 2000. "I fell in love with him and now I'm his farm-slave for life," she says. The family includes the couple's daughter, Lola, three and a half years old, and Natalie's son, Sage, 13.

When The Sun visits, the stand offers produce picked the same day: radishes at \$1.50 a bunch, cauliflower \$2.50-\$3.50, spring onions \$1.50 and arugula, a salad green, at \$3.50 a bag.

"I'm like you," she says, watching the reporter's frown. "I can't eat a lot of it."

The key to such early produce is to plant in summer, let the produce go dormant in winter, then surge ahead the following spring.

"It's our trick of the trade, but you can tell people," Natalie says with a smile. "It's okay."

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For further information on urban farming, Metro Vancouver is hosting a food security workshop June 18 in Surrey.

Visit www.gvrd.bc.ca/growth/agriculture.htm

Credit: Larry Pynn; Vancouver Sun