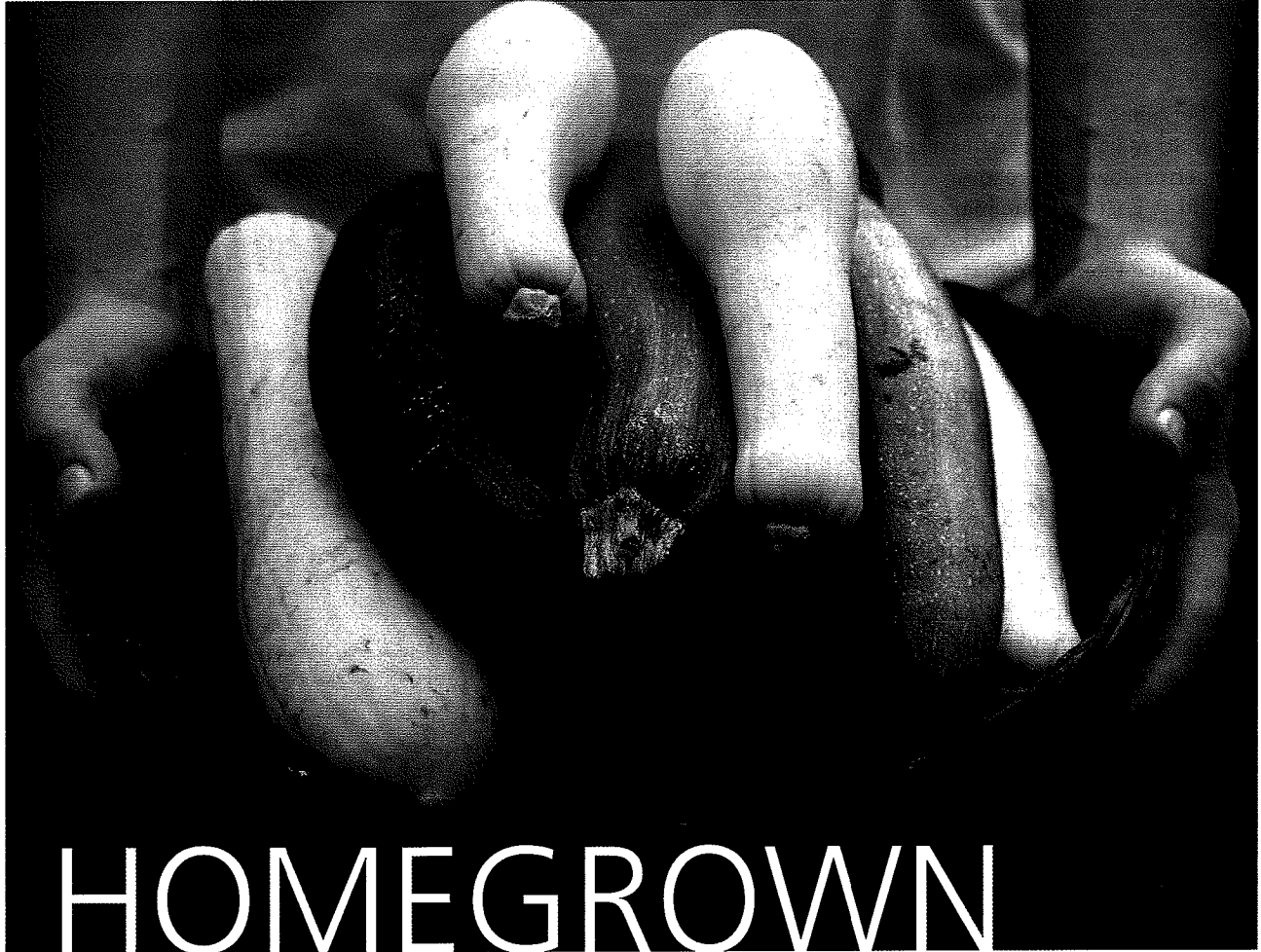


Active Adult (Unionville, ON)			Order/Commande
			124898
Date 31.08.2008	Circ. 100000	Page 35	1 / 5

support local growers

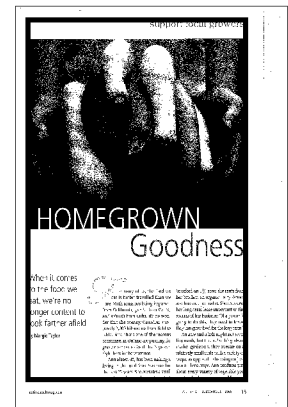


HOMEGROWN

Goodness

When it comes to the food we eat, we're no longer content to look farther afield

By Margie Taylor



Active Adult (Unionville, ON)			Order/Commande
			124898
Date 31.08.2008	Circ. 100000	Page 35	2 / 5

For many of us, the food we eat is better travelled than we are. With tomatoes being imported from California, garlic from China, and spinach from Cuba, it's no wonder that the average Canadian meal travels 2,000 kilometres from field to table. And that's one of the reasons consumers in Ontario are pushing for greater access to food that's grown right here in the province.

Ann Slater, 45, has been making a living in the local food business for the past 25 years. She operates a small organic market garden just west of Stratford on 1 1/2 acres she rents from her brother, an organic dairy farmer and freelance journalist. She considers her long-term lease important to the success of her business: "If a person is going to do this, they need to know they can grow food for the long term."

An acre and a half might not seem like much, but that's the thing about market gardeners: they operate on a relatively small scale with a variety of crops, as opposed to focusing on just two or three crops. Ann produces just about every variety of vegetable you can think of, and between May and October, she sells them once a week at the St. Marys Farmers' Market 10 kilometres down the road.

And it isn't just the market customers who get to sample the variety of produce from Ann Slater, Fresh Organic Vegetables. For the past 15 years or so, Ann's been supported by a CSA, which stands for community-

shared, or community-supported, agriculture.

LITTLE SPROUTS

"In my case, I have 35 people who sign up for the season to get fresh produce every Tuesday," she explains. "They get what I have. So if it's a bad year for squash, they're not going to get squash. And each week, they get what's ready that week. So the first weeks are going to be spinach, lettuce, and bok choy, and maybe some green onions. Then, gradually, we'll switch to peas, and then beans and beets, and maybe some potatoes and stuff, and zucchini."

This past April, I drove out to Ann's one Saturday morning to talk to her about growing food and marketing it direct to local consumers. As we made our way to the hoophouse — a plastic greenhouse where the first of her vegetables were already in leaf — we stopped to inspect seedlings pushing through the earth in rows of plastic trays next to her.

The sprouting peppers had been planted at the beginning of March; the tomatoes at the end of March. Most of them, Ann told me, would end up out in the garden around the 10th of June and be available to her customers by the end of July, along with the beans, beets, onions, leeks, lettuce, and salad greens.

When she's not tending her market garden, Ann is busy focusing on her duties as the president of the Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario. While the organization does promote organic farming practices, it's open to all those wanting to make



Active Adult (Unionville, ON)			Order/Commande
			124898
Date 31.08.2008	Circ. 100000	Page 35	3 / 5

changes in the way they farm without necessarily “going all the way to organic,” as Ann says.

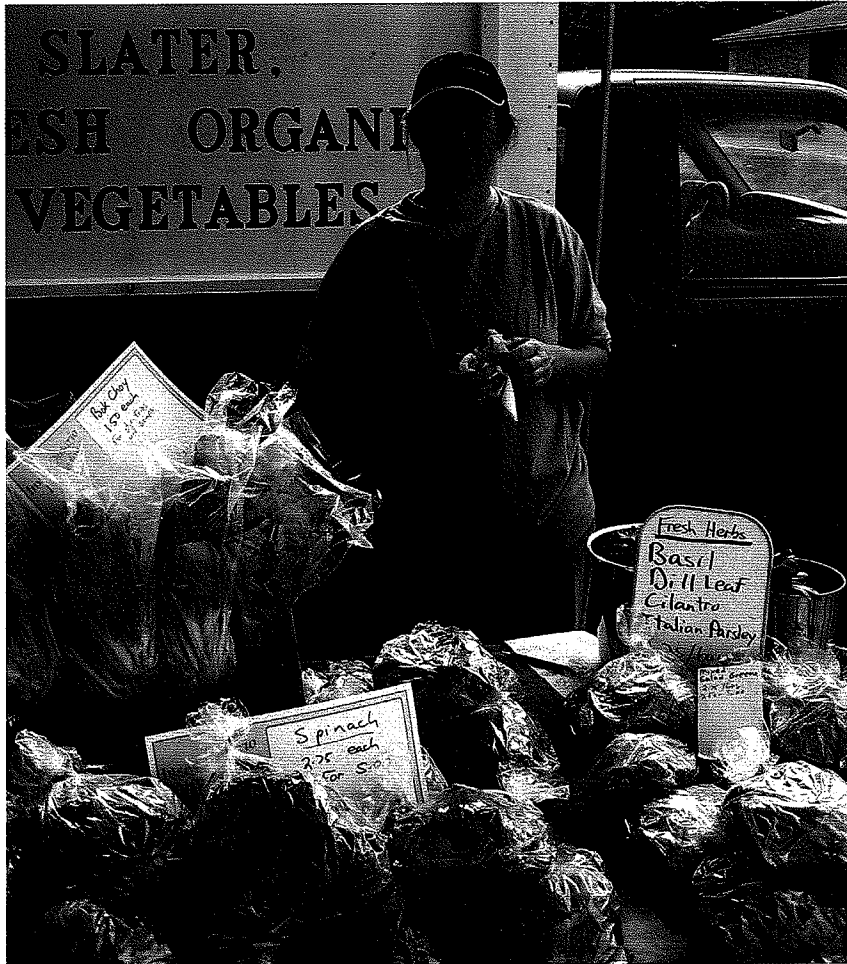
According to a recent survey, Canadians believe that locally grown food is superior to “regular” food. And they say that in addition to being better and healthier, it supports the local economy. Local food advocates, known as “locavores,” argue that if you buy from a small, local farmer, the distance from consumer to producer is reduced and you know where your food is coming from. It’s partly about food safety, and it’s partly about our changing values. As a society, we’re concerned for our farmers, and many of us no longer buy into the idea that bigger is automatically better.

ACTIVE RESEARCH

Susan Turner would concur. As program coordinator for Rural Women Making Change (rwmc.uoguelph.ca), a five-year program based at the University of Guelph, she believes that local food rests on the idea that what you eat is known, or knowable, to you. “For some,” she says, “it means what you put on the table and into the mouths you feed comes from within 100 miles, and for others it is grown just down the road.”

Susan is one of many scholars turning to action-oriented research, working with community-based service organizations trying to deliver services in areas where governments have pulled out. Many of them see local food systems as part of the solution to

Active Adult (Unionville, ON)			Order/Commande
			124898
Date 31.08.2008	Circ. 100000	Page 35	4 / 5



Ann is also the president of the Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario.

poverty and health issues as well as other problems faced by local economies, particularly in rural areas in desperate need of jobs. Eating locally produced food builds and supports local economies that help preserve our rural heritage. It also directly connects farmers to community organizations and consumers, many of whom are women feeding their families, which nowadays include seniors.

According to Susan, the global food crisis is a direct result of an agri-food system that focuses on international chemical companies and large-scale production while failing to invest in infrastructure at the local level. She suggests we need to look at investing in the kinds of things that make local food systems possible, such as smaller-scale food processing plants, abattoirs and canneries.

"Strategies for building safe, environmentally conscious local food systems should be integral to every regional economic development strategy in Canada for the sake of our farmers and the sake of us all," she says.

The situation for consumers can be confusing. Even food that is labelled "Product of Canada" or "Canada #1" may come from China. Thanks to our labelling regulations, a so-called Canadian product may only have packaging that was manufactured or assembled in Canada.

Much of the "grassroots" local food activity is being driven by women, both as consumers and as farmers. More and more farm women are turning to organic farming as a way of supplementing the family income, and according to Ann Slater, young women from the city are increasingly finding ways to get into small-scale food production.

STILL GROWING

"I'm starting to hear of a lot of people who are finding alternative ways to get some land," she says. "For a long time, I didn't know of anyone else

who was on part of a bigger farm. Now there are lots of young people who are farming on other farms. These belong to farmers with a couple hundred acres. So if someone wants to rent a couple of acres, it's not really a big deal for them."

While there's plenty of demand for local food on the part of consumers, farmers' markets in Ontario are struggling to find enough vendors. Farmers' Markets Ontario and the Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation have been working together to open up farmer-based markets in various parts of southern Ontario. They carry out regular inspections to ensure that the vendors are actually farmers, which, according to Ann, isn't always the case.

Many farmers' markets sell food that's been trucked in from food terminals. Those terminals source food from countries in Asia and Latin America, where food safety and quality standards are generally lower than ours. And the vendors who sell the food from those terminals often undercut the local farmers.

"To me, a good farmers' market is a farmer-only market, not one where people bring food from the food terminal," says Ann. "St. Marys Farmers' Market is a farmer-only market; you have to be a farmer to sell there. And the farmers that are there are committed to making a living farming, and they're committed to bringing good-quality stuff and not just dumping it."

NEW PRODUCE

So how have tastes changed since Ann started market gardening 25 years ago? She admits that there's still not a big demand for bok choy in her part of Oxford County, but if she were selling in London or the GTA, she'd sell a lot more of it. Farmers in the Greenbelt area are now growing mustard greens, fuzzy squash, bitter melon, water spinach, Chinese okra, and other foods familiar to the growing ethnic population in the Golden

Horseshoe. Still, Ann's steadily making progress introducing new vegetable varieties to her customers.

"That's the thing about the CSA," she says. "I can sell different unfamiliar kinds of produce as long as I give people recipes and tell them how to use it – it's not fair to give people something like that without showing them how to use it. Having a sure way to sell it – like through the CSA – allows me to introduce it to the farmers' market."

In a world of global markets and huge, faceless conglomerates, the push for fresh, locally grown food that we can trust seems almost inevitable. In the end, it's possible it will all come down to those of us at the local level who are concerned about our families, our food, our neighbours, and our environment. ■

TO FIND A FARMERS' MARKET IN YOUR AREA, GO TO:

farmersmarketsontario.com
ourgreenbelt.ca

For more information on the Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario, check out their website: efao.ca

