

Reimagining Community Gardens in the Waterloo Region

The Hand-Up Model

July 26, 2024 • Erica Carmount

A hand up model treats people as needing a hand up, not a hand out, where individuals are viewed not as dependents but as business partners looking to improve their lives.

Located north of Petersburg in Wilmot, Ontario, the Petersburg Community Garden was created with the intention of creating equity of opportunity to foster a sense of inclusion and a belief that individuals moving into the Waterloo Region can succeed there. It was also created in response to the growing request for land to grow food from new Canadians who have moved into the area.

Non-profit food organizations and charities that operate as a handout model are not a sustainable solution to food security and are struggling to meet the growing demand for food. In the Region of Waterloo alone, nearly 1 in 10 households struggle to afford to put food on the table, up from 1 in 14 households in 2023.

Community gardens can be a viable alternative to enhancing local food security by supplementing diets with nutritious food. For new Canadians in particular, community gardens are also a great resource for those who face barriers related to language, health, employment and community inclusion.



Doug Jones and Petersburg gardener

***“New Canadians define food insecurity differently than not having enough money to grow food, they define food insecurity as having to buy food, period.”
-Doug Jones***

The current model of community gardens in urban areas, however, is not providing people with the opportunity to produce substantial amounts of food for themselves and falls short in meeting the needs of the people in which they are intended to serve.

Doug Jones, Coordinator of the Waterloo Region Community Garden Network ([WRCGN](#)), connected with Darrel and Nicole Door to enquire about renting land. With infrastructure support from the Region of Waterloo Community [Environmental Fund](#) and the Region of Waterloo [Upstream Fund](#) (the Equity, Diversity and Inclusion fund), Petersburg offers growers a good water supply, water pump, a C CAN for the storage of tools and materials, and other resources needed for the farm itself.

Inspired by [KIVA](#), a micro loan agency, Petersburg operates as a hand up model. The hand up model involves establishing dignity for people and trust so that people are treated as equals. According to Jones, “equity of opportunity stems from treating people as equals, not as less in any way [...] Equity is about achieving ownership and the chance to succeed by having ownership. It should no longer be that there is an elite class that are the only people who have access to ownership of land and sovereignty that comes with ownership”.

However, Jones also believes that food sovereignty doesn't necessarily require ownership of land. Instead, Jones advocates for individuals to rent land so that they can get their feet wet in Ontario food production. Growing food in Ontario requires significant adaptation to a shorter growing season, cooler weather, and topsoil that needs to be highly nurtured and skillfully managed. At Petersburg, growers pay to rent their land and in return receive access to free water, use of the shed and tools.

Canada's farming landscape has changed significantly in the last century. From 1941 to 2021, the number of family farms has declined by nearly 75 percent as large numbers of Canadians have moved into urban settings. Working in industry, farmers found they could make more money than they did in agriculture. With a surplus of cash, it was suddenly more convenient to buy food instead of growing it through one's own labour. Food dependency furthered with the importation of cheaper harvests grown in other countries, shipped using cheap fossil fuels on boats that could bring food products into Canadian markets at a cheaper price than what could be produced at home.



“When you think about slugging it out under the heat with a hoe all day in a garden, the courage that it takes and the value that it has for new Canadians in terms of physiological well-being and their sense of dignity and pride, it's really significant. We have to care to do this work and the motivation has to come from caring”.

-Doug Jones

Today, with rising food costs, volatile global markets, the high cost of using fossil fuels, and climate change there has never been a greater time to rejuvenate interest in local food production.

Fortunately, new Canadians who know how to grow food, want to grow food and are willing to contribute to local markets are important resources when it comes to boosting local food production and a struggling agriculture labour sector. By 2033, it's reported that 40 percent of farmers are predicted to retire, leaving Canada short of nearly 30,000 farmers and an additional 24,000 general workers.

By capturing the interest and skills of new Canadians, Jones hopes that if the WRCGN can increase production, the not-for-profit can change the amount of food that is available in the local food system and influence prices. For Jones, this is a really important capture and a big part of the change he's looking for when it comes to food self-sufficiency in the Region.



Looking towards the future, Jones notes that it's important that the garden remains community oriented in order to be self-sustaining. This means there has to be leadership, a sense of direction, guidance for people, and self-management or else the garden will be colonialist in its nature. "I think one of the pitfalls we have to be careful about," states Jones, "is that we don't aggrandize ourselves as individuals or institutions [...] we should recognize the project for what it is: a self run organization". The next steps for Petersburg also include improving market knowledge and access for growers. This includes taking advantage of market terminals such as the St. Jacobs Farmers' Market and undertaxed knowledge from the local Mennonite community.

The Petersburg garden currently provides nearly 37 gardeners and local organizations with 20 acres of gardening plots ranging from a half to a whole acre. Out of those 37 gardeners, 33 are new Canadians from Myanmar, Syrian, Kurdistan, Turkey, the Congo, Kenya, Sudan, Zimbabwe and Namibia all working to address food insecurity in the Region by growing food for their families and communities. Food security and sovereignty for Jones is rooted in an individuals ability to grow their own culturally appropriate foods at their own pace. This philosophy lies at the heart of the Petersburg Community Garden.

To learn more about the Petersburg Community Garden, check out the [WRCGN website](#) and learn more about what's happening in the Region of Waterloo.



Waterloo Region Community Garden Network

