



# placing food nina-marie lister

maps by jason globus-goldberg, adina israel, david carruthers  
photographs by sophie bouy

**Toronto is a fabulous city for eating.** In this city-region of 5 million people there is no shortage of food choice, from *foie gras* to French fries. Comfort foods, exotic ingredients, and traditional fare of all of the city's myriad ethno-cultural groups abound in local shops and markets year-round. Lyrical menus cater to a global palate: phad thai, tikka masala, tostadas, dim sum, sushi, ceviche. Foods once considered luxuries or specialties are now staples, branded by every supermarket chain, while imported delicacies fill entire grocery aisles. And yet, amid these flavors of diversity, there is growing disparity, ambivalence, and ignorance. Indulgence and hunger coexist in this city of plenty, complicated by a lack of the most basic awareness of food as part of nature—of its sowing and growing, from seed to harvest; of time and place, seasons and soils. The elemental knowledge of what we eat is disappearing. In terms of food, everything from anywhere is available all the time for some, while basic subsistence remains out of reach for others. On the table, seasons no longer matter; nor does distance traveled, cost, or the farmer's name. Like other cosmopolitan urban regions, Toronto is a city with the menu of the world. So how is it that so much of this food diversity seems to come from nowhere in particular, while consumers—who are otherwise increasingly gastronomically knowledgeable—neither notice nor care? Have we become so disconnected from our food that we have forgotten the truth that underlies the cliché—*we are what we eat*?

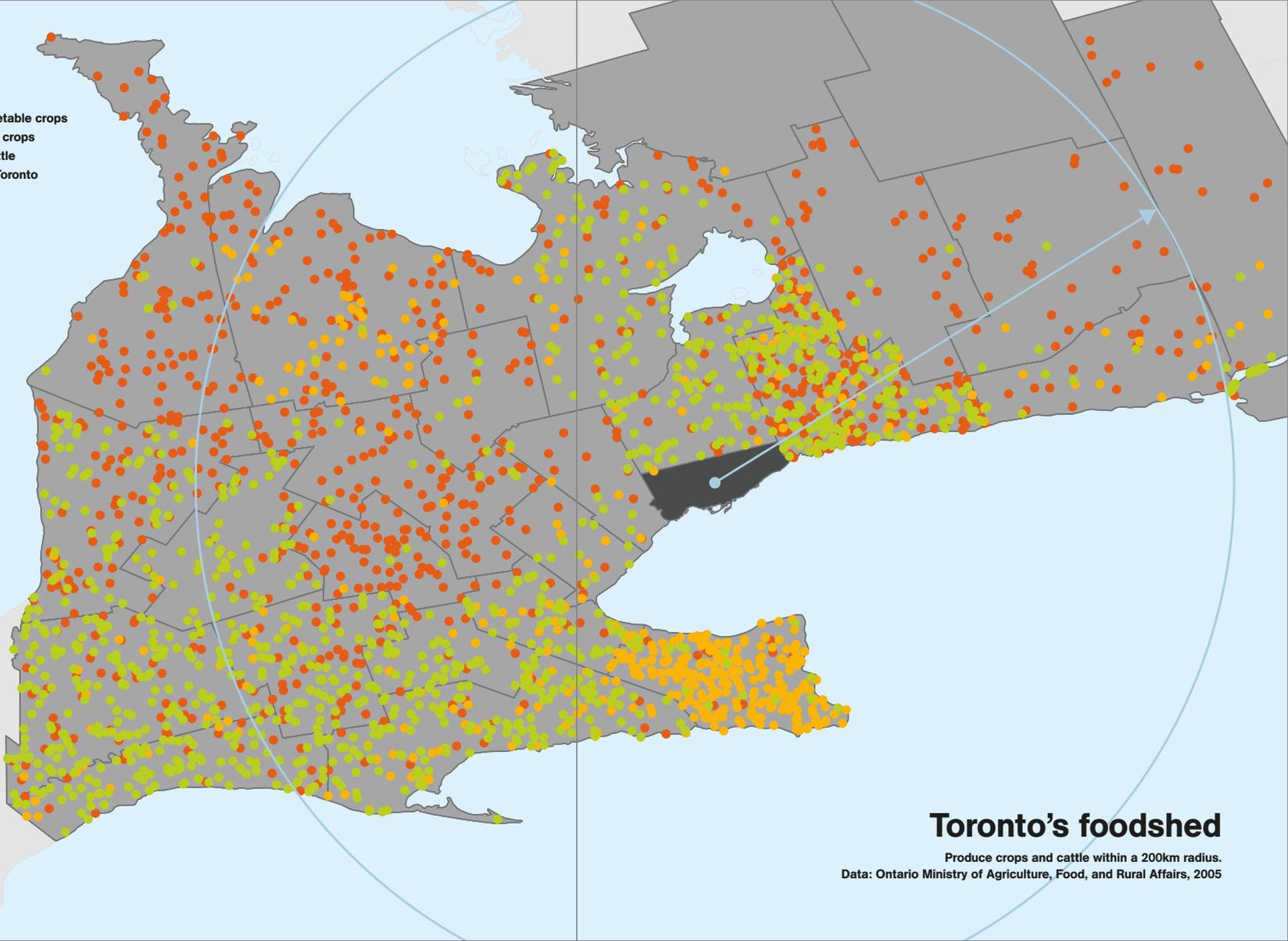
The cornucopia that tempts Torontonians and other global urbanites is distracting us from the serious and growing problem of *placeless food*. If we look to the most common place of purchase as evidence, we find that for most supermarket shoppers the origin, growing, and production of food are invisible and irrelevant. In most cases, price is the deciding factor in what people will buy. Although interest in organic and more healthful foods is evident in the dedicated

organics sections that are now appearing even in the big supermarket chains, these comparatively expensive products are sold primarily to upscale consumers—and even these more discerning shoppers will often reject locally grown and seasonal produce in favor of something exotic from Mexico or South Africa that is certified “organic.” But if we take seriously the intertwined issues of nutrition, health, local agriculture, food security for a growing population, and sustainability of the food supply, we ought to be very concerned with the place of food, and its place in our lives.

Sensitivity to place and seasonality is a subtle and elusive goal in the contemporary marketplace, with its overwhelming emphasis on diversity of selection and ever-increasing indulgence. In the Toronto region these powerful factors in consumption are brought together in synergy with southern Ontario's fertile farms, mass migration, and a booming economy. First, there is the land itself. On the glacial soils of the northwestern shore of Lake Ontario, Toronto enjoys a prime location in one of Canada's most arable regions. While just under 5 percent of Canada's vast 10-million-square-kilometer land base is classified as *prime agricultural land* (or Classes 1 to 3 according to the Canada Land Inventory), Ontario enjoys most of it: 51 percent, just over half of Canada's Class 1 farmland, is in Southern Ontario (Watkins et al. 6) and much of this area is within Toronto's “foodshed.”

Like a watershed, which captures the rainfall in a particular land area and moves it through streams and underground channels into a local river or lake, a foodshed captures the food products that flow from local farms surrounding a given urban area, and routes them into the city to the population that will consume them. Based on the time it would take an urbanite to make a short day trip to a local farm to pick apples or buy fresh corn, or for a local farmer to bring her produce to a Saturday market, Toronto's foodshed reasonably lies

- = 100 vegetable crops
- = 100 fruit crops
- = 1000 cattle
- = City of Toronto



## Toronto's foodshed

Produce crops and cattle within a 200km radius.  
Data: Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Affairs, 2005

within a two-hundred-kilometer radius of the city. To the south and west of Toronto lies the most productive part of our foodshed: the mixed-agricultural areas of Wellington and Haldimand-Norfolk counties, the corn and soybean fields of Oxford, and the tender-fruit lands of Niagara where grapes and stone fruits—cherries, peaches, plums, pears and apricots—abound. To the north of Toronto lies the bulk of the Greenbelt, a new 720,000-hectare (1.8 million acres) strip of land that has been designated off limits to urban development, to protect natural areas and encourage working farmland; farther north, beyond this belt, are the beef and hog farms of the Simcoe-Grey region. To the east of Toronto there remains a patchwork quilt of small family-run farms in Oshawa, Cobourg, Peterborough, the Kawarthas, and Prince Edward County.

Despite the extremes of the continental climate, an incredible variety of food is grown in Southern Ontario. The growing season is short but intense, from late May to mid-October, and the long hot days in mid-summer are ideal for ripening summer produce and setting winter vegetables. Early settlers quickly learned the rhythms of the seasons. They planted and harvested their crops in waves washed in by the summer sun: first the tender spring greens and early-ripening vegetables, from asparagus to peas; then the longer-ripening, bigger produce, such as beans, corn, tomatoes, and stone fruits; ending in autumn with frost-hardy, long-lasting apples and the dense vegetables of winter, from pumpkins and squash to kale and collards.

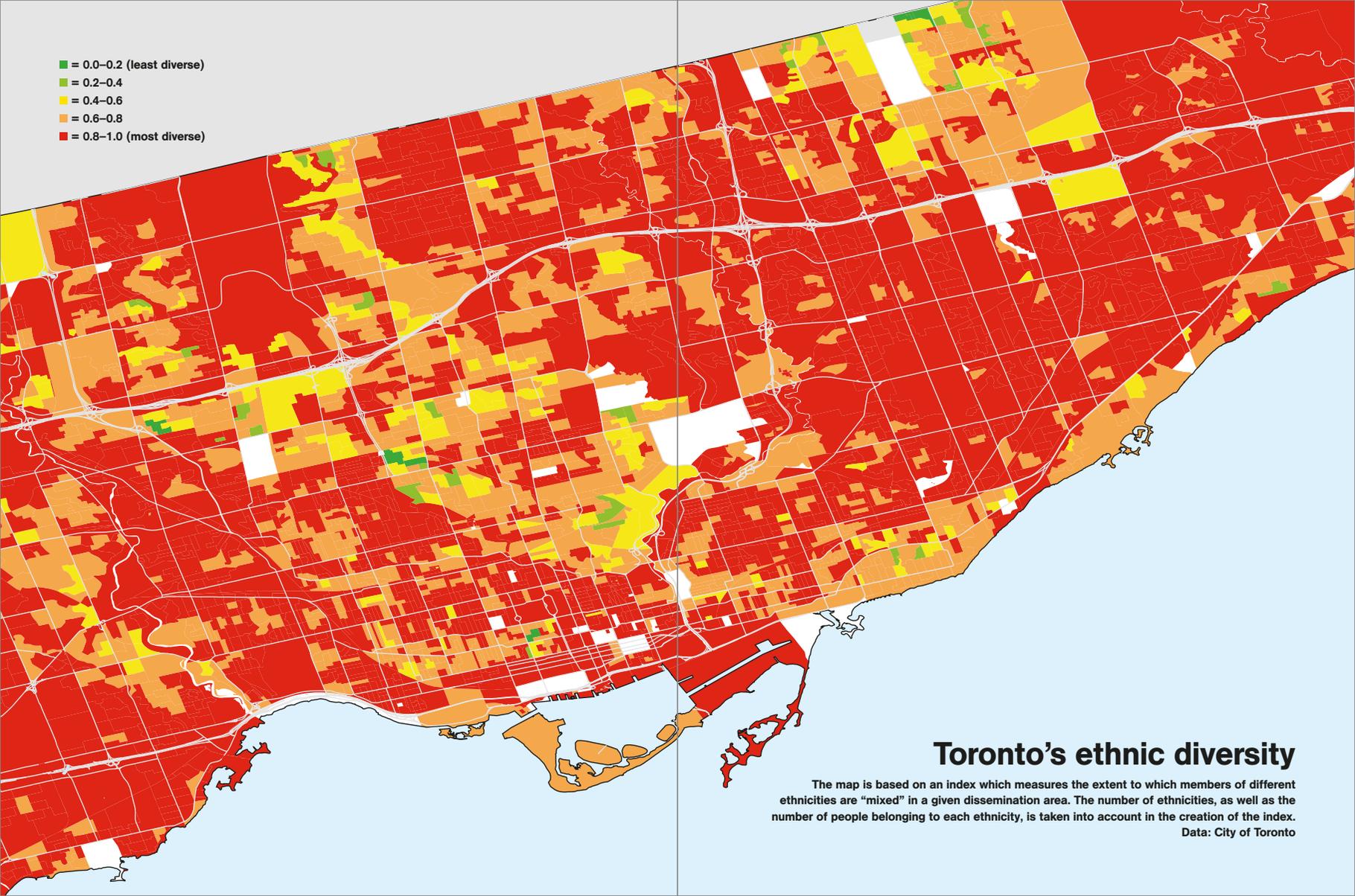
For many generations, Canadians took advantage of the bountiful fall harvest and made it last all winter, through preserving, pickling, and canning, arts well known to our grandparents though all but lost today. Now the long winters and relatively short growing seasons are irrelevant, and even hemispheres don't matter. No longer do Canadians look forward to June and the sweetness of the tiny perfect

fruit that once signaled summer—the strawberry, one of only a few fruits native to Canada, has become a staple. Thanks to a synergy of consumer demand, the Green Revolution of fertilizers and pesticides, comparatively low-cost fuel, falling commodity prices, and ease of transportation, consumers can have whatever they want whenever they want it.

Who are they, the people of Toronto, who consume all this food? As Canada's largest city, Toronto is the fifth-largest urban center in North America, after Mexico City, New York, Los Angeles and Chicago (City Mayors' Statistics). It is also one of the fastest-growing city-regions in Canada, growing in cultural diversity as well as size (Ontario Ministry of Public Infrastructure Renewal 12; Statistics Canada 2006, 9–10). Once known as a British colonial outpost, where shops closed on Sunday and coffee was an exotic drink, Toronto now has more Muslim than Presbyterian residents (Troper 4). Notably, the city is home to 43 percent (792,000) of all new immigrants to Canada (McIsaac 9), and there is a higher proportion of immigrants in Toronto's population than in many other global urban centers: almost half (47 percent) of Toronto's residents were born in another country compared with 40 percent in Miami, 31 percent in Sydney, 30 percent in Los Angeles, and 23 percent in New York City (Hou and Bourne 9; McIsaac 59). Torontonians come from more than two hundred countries of origin and speak more than one hundred different languages; more than a third of the city's residents speak a language other than English at home and 43 percent are members of a visible minority (Statistics Canada 2001).

The changes in Toronto's population—and in its collective pantry—began in earnest after the Second World War. Today, both the pace of immigration and the diversity of newcomers' countries of origin have increased significantly. Of the more than 125,000

- = 0.0–0.2 (least diverse)
- = 0.2–0.4
- = 0.4–0.6
- = 0.6–0.8
- = 0.8–1.0 (most diverse)



## Toronto's ethnic diversity

The map is based on an index which measures the extent to which members of different ethnicities are "mixed" in a given dissemination area. The number of ethnicities, as well as the number of people belonging to each ethnicity, is taken into account in the creation of the index.

Data: City of Toronto

immigrants arriving in Ontario each year, almost half come from five countries: India, China, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Iran—and most settle in Toronto (Dowding-Paré). Immigration from non-European countries has transformed Toronto, stocking grocery stores with the foods of the world. The city has an almost unimaginable variety of places to eat and shops in which to buy food: 6,172 food service establishments (of which 4,675 are restaurants) and 4,884 food shops and grocery stores (Food and Hunger Action Committee 2001a, 22; Center for the Study of Commercial Activity). Toronto's Ontario Food Terminal, with its vibrant Saturday farmers' market, is the largest wholesale produce distribution center in Canada and ranks in the top five such centers in North America (Ontario Food Terminal Board); it supplies the city's myriad greengrocers, which far outnumber those in the average US city (Cosgrove 23). Furthermore, many of these groceries, restaurants and food retailers are ethno-specific, from Chinese groceries and Greek bakers to Indian buffets and Portuguese fishmongers. There is nothing you can't get in Toronto. All year round, grocery shelves are stocked with the same array of foods—only the geography changes with the seasons: mussels from Prince Edward Island one month and New Zealand the next; in summer, apples from South Africa; winter asparagus from Peru; spring corn from Texas; winter grapes from Chile.

Today's consumers want cheap food, fast. They want a lot of it, and they want it 24/7. They don't care where it comes from. But ultimately, the feast may come at a much higher price than we imagine. The real costs of ubiquitously available food, coupled with a cultural ambivalence towards—and growing ignorance of—its production and place of origin, may be invisible to most of us now, but as a society we will pay eventually. As Barbara Kingsolver warns, “we get [cheap food] at a price...not measured in money, but in untallied debts that

will be paid by our children in the currency of extinctions, economic unravelings, and global climate change” (4).

### **the perils of placeless food**

The risks of placeless food—food that comes from anywhere and everywhere—are worth considering. One of the most immediate concerns is that in spite of access to everything, many city residents have nothing to eat. Hunger is a growing problem in this city of plenty, which somehow has more food banks than McDonald's outlets (Toronto Food Policy Council 1994, 6). The reasons for urban poverty and hunger are complex, but they are deeply rooted in our attitudes to food and the way in which we grow, market, import, and sell it. When the food supply is ruled by the laws of commerce rather than respectful of the laws of nature, and food retailers cater ever more exclusively to the affluent, the result further marginalizes the poor. People who in the past could at least grow vegetables in the summer are now more often dependent on food banks to feed their children and themselves.

Environmental risks are significant, as food sources become industrialized, centralized, and mass-produced. In particular, the loss of genetic diversity and eventual extinction in seeds and crop stock are paramount concerns to global food security. Other related threats to environmental health result from agricultural pollution, declining soil fertility, and the loss of habitat for other species that co-exist on farmland. Increased reliance on fertilizers, pesticides, fossil fuels used in farming, and widespread irrigation at once impoverish and contaminate the biosphere.

There are other societal and economic risks, too, including loss of farming as a basic skill, the disappearance of the rural community

and way of life, and the decline of the local agricultural economy. For the population as a whole placeless food may pose long-term health risks, some of them poorly understood, as foods travel farther to market, losing vital nutrients in transit, and as foods are mass-produced, genetically engineered, and grown with an increasing reliance on chemical pesticides and fertilizers.

At the root of these complex risks is a relatively simple question of value. If a society does not value its farmers and farmland, then it does not value the capacity to grow its own food, and both will eventually be lost. For small farmers in particular, farming is becoming an unsustainable activity, and for those who are close to an encroaching city, it is often more profitable to sell their land than to farm it (Watkins et al. 7). Each rural severance further fragments the landscape. Fields and orchards are quickly converted into rural residential communities, then suburbs, and eventually more homogeneous suburban sprawl. Ontario has no specific legislation to protect farmland, and as long as land prices continue to rise in the urban fringe, farmers are selling out and moving on. And who can blame them, when it costs more to sow and tend a crop than they can make selling it? Bunce and Maurer report that it costs \$1.40 (per pound) to raise a hog for market, yet Ontario's major meat processor, Maple Leaf Foods, will pay only \$1.35 for the same hog (27). In this way, corporate food processing monopolies force tight margins on farmers, resulting in a significant economic challenge for many who already supplement their farm income, with up to two-thirds of their household income derived from non-farm activities. Overall, rising costs and declining commodity prices are seen as major barriers to the viability of local farming in the long term (Bunce and Maurer 26).

Couple this trend with accelerating population growth in Toronto, and local farmland is truly at risk. As the third-fastest-growing



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metropolitan area in North America, the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) had a population of 5.8 million in 2005 and is projected to reach 8.6 million by 2031 (Ontario Ministry of Public Infrastructure Renewal: Schedule 3). Land in the urban fringe will be needed to house this growing population, and a good deal of it is dependable farmland. Furthermore, much of the agriculture in the outer city limits takes place on rented land (Bunce and Maurer 34), which has already been sold on speculation to developers, and is rented back by farmers. Between 1951 and 2001, the already limited supply of Canada's quality agricultural land declined by 4 percent, while the demand for cultivated land increased by 20 percent.

By 2001, about half of Canada's total urbanized area was located on what was once quality agricultural land, and is now irrevocably lost. In Ontario the situation is grim: more than half of all Canada's prime agricultural land (56 percent) is in Ontario, most of it concentrated in the heavily urbanized areas of the south, in Toronto's urban shadow (Hofmann et al. 7–8). Indeed, most of Ontario's quality farmland is visible from the top of Toronto's CN Tower. If this trend continues unchecked, another 40 percent of the prime land that is still productive today will be lost by 2026 (Cosgrove 8). At that point, Toronto will no longer be "food secure"; *the city will be unable to feed itself*. Given these figures it is hard to take seriously the current political drive to make Toronto North America's "greenest," most sustainable city (Gorrie).

Some critics argue that the city is already food insecure, as Toronto has become increasingly reliant on food imports. According to the Food and Hunger Action Committee (FHAC), in 1960 most of Toronto's food came from within 350 kilometers of the city, or almost entirely from within its foodshed (FHAC 2001b, 3). Today the city's food comes from virtually everywhere: the average North American

food molecule travels 3,000 kilometers, with between 10 and 15 calories of energy required to deliver 1 calorie of food (Cosgrove 28). At least 60 percent of the fresh produce consumed in Toronto is imported from the United States, and a third of this arrives during Ontario's own growing season, competing with local produce for a place in the grocery basket. About \$172 million is spent annually in the GTA to import fresh vegetables, many of which can be grown here (FHAC 2001a, 13). Put another way, despite having more than half of Canada's most productive agricultural land, Ontario has a food deficit of approximately \$3 billion (Cosgrove 21).

We are also allowing ever larger corporate bodies to control the production and consumption of food. "Supersizing" is changing everything from big-box retail outlets and supermarkets to portion sizes and farms. Small family farms have shrunk in both size and number, while large-scale agricultural industries have grown. The number of farms in Canada has dropped from 711,000 in 1921 to fewer than 250,000 today, while the average farm grew from 237 acres to 675 acres between 1941 and 2001 (Heintzman 2). The combined forces of urban pressure on farmland, low prices from corporate food processors, and increasing reliance on food imports (many of which can be produced more inexpensively elsewhere) make for a grim economic outlook for the local family farm. In a recent study by Bunce and Maurer (25) many Toronto-area farmers expressed pessimism about the future of farming, describing their situation as "desperate," "bleak," "terrible," "tough," and "precarious." Most of these farmers do not see a future in farming for their children and, in fact, would not encourage them to stay on the farm.

The massive single-crop agribusinesses that have replaced the family farm tend to use more aggressive agricultural practices, including more intensive irrigation, fertilizers, herbicides, and



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pesticides. Farms in Canada and throughout the industrialized countries have evolved into major business concerns, mass-producing pork rather than pigs, or operating beef feedlots rather than cattle farms. Some argue that this transformation from agriculture into industry is an assault on local ecosystems and poor farmers alike, homogenizing and reducing the natural diversity of seeds, habitats, and landscapes (Shiva 122).

To achieve economies of scale and predictable profits, industrial agriculture imposes uniform crop types and management practices, such as standardized planting and harvesting dates. As a result, biological and genetic diversity has declined on most farms in Canada and other industrialized countries over the last century, and virtually all modernized farms are now monocultures. Low crop diversity in turn results in reduced diversity of other species, such as insects, birds, and soil organisms. Furthermore, monocultures increase dependence on pesticides, because pests and disease can infest and infect monocultures more readily than diverse crop mixtures. Not surprisingly, monocultures also have lower populations of natural enemies that prey on pests, such as spiders, wasps, dragonflies, and predatory beetles (Picone and Van Tassel 100).

Today just three high-yielding varieties of rice, wheat, and corn provide 60 percent of the human diet worldwide. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, 75 percent of crop diversity was lost during the twentieth century as traditional crops were edged out, while modern cultivars have replaced older varieties for 70 percent of the world's corn, 75 percent of Asian rice, and half of the wheat in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. In 1950, India had more than 30,000 wild varieties of rice, but only 50 are expected to remain by 2015 (Picone and Van Tassel 100). Of 7,098 apple varieties cultivated between 1804 and 1904,

approximately 86 percent have been lost. Similarly, 95 percent of cabbages, 94 percent of peas, 91 percent of field corns, and 81 percent of tomato varieties no longer exist (FAO 1998, 14). Native to the Andes region of Peru, the humble potato has more than 5,000 native cultivars; in North America, a *single* variety, the russet, now accounts for nearly 75 percent of planted acreage. Almost the entire crop is used by the food service sector to produce frozen French fries (United States Department of Agriculture). In losing traditional plant varieties, we also lose forever the unique genetic history of each species and, along with it, genes for disease and pest resistance, as well as the potential for adaptation to differences in soils and climate. In effect, as we simplify our food system, we are attacking the environment's capacity for future evolution and adaptation to inevitable change.

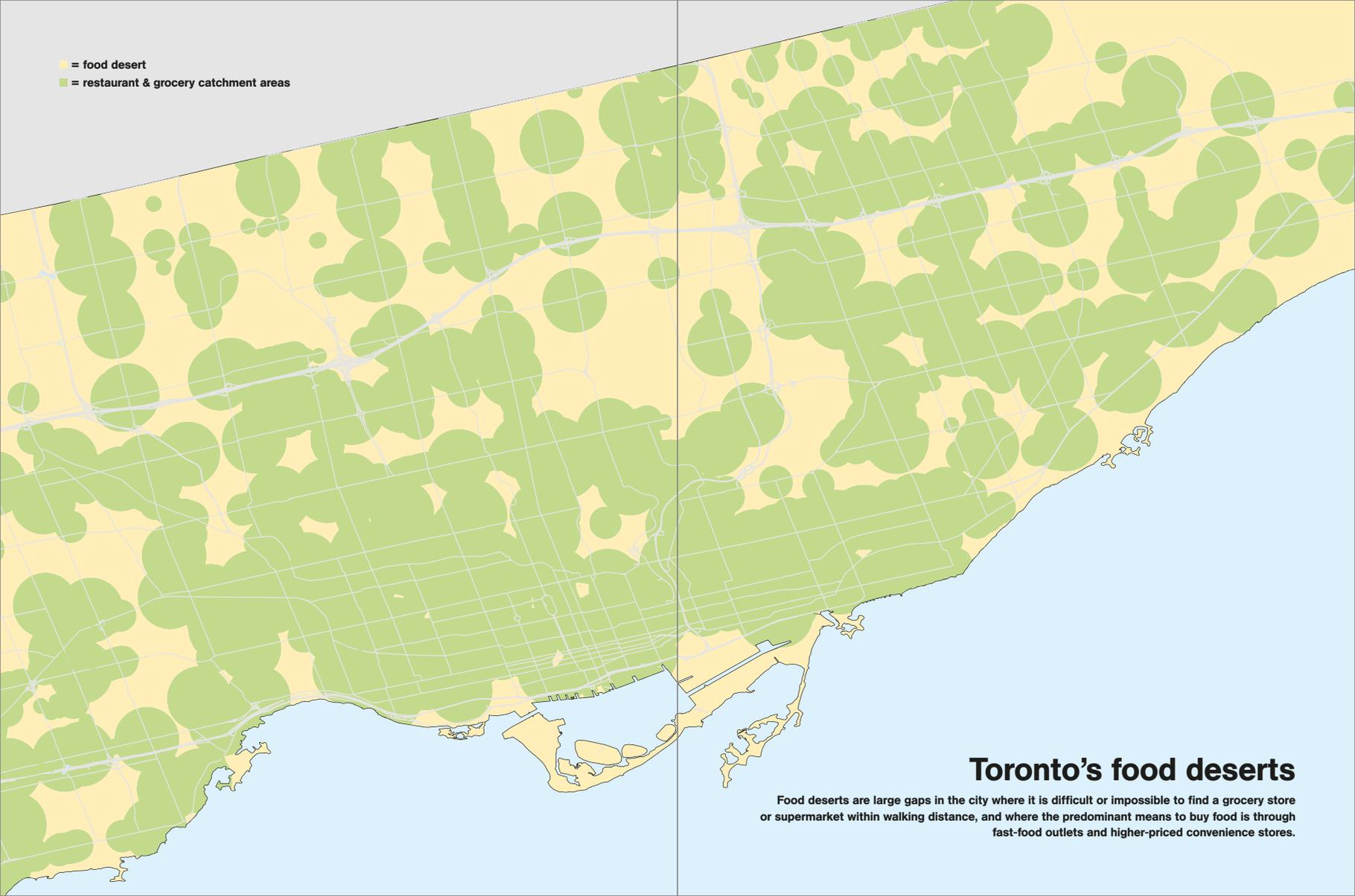
Although industrial agriculture has increased global food production to record levels, it has done so through reliance on chemicals that were originally designed for warfare. Pesticides were developed from nerve agents, herbicides from defoliants. One of the world's largest agricultural biotechnology companies, Monsanto, manufactured Agent Orange and DDT, two of the most notorious chemicals associated with the Vietnam War and the Green Revolution respectively, while today the company produces both genetically engineered seeds and the pesticides and herbicides on which they are programmed to depend. The names of the pesticides manufactured by Monsanto and its affiliates evoke this warlike approach: "Lasso," "Machete," "Roundup," "Prowl," and "Avenge." As Vandana Shiva observes, "this is the language of war, not sustainability" (123).

The recent patent of "terminator technology" extends the disturbing association of food and war. In this new process plants are genetically engineered to produce "sterile seeds"—a particularly sinister oxymoron. Critics charge that the technology is nothing

short of a threat to human survival, an insidious assault on both farmers and ecosystems, creating a culture of economic dependence in farmers who use the seed, and an unknown risk of genetic contamination in wild seed and other cultivated crops. Most farmers worldwide, and many small local farmers, still collect their best seeds from each year's harvest to replant the following year. In doing so, they are selecting the fittest crop for their own soil, climate, and growing conditions, and ensuring the genetic health of their crops over time. By gathering and saving seeds—the kernel in which life itself is contained—farmers are also ensuring that the essence of place is embedded within each crop produced, reflecting within each plant the specific conditions to which it is uniquely adapted. The notion of plants that cannot reproduce themselves is as repugnant as it is dangerous, threatening the long-term sustainability of the food supply and the adaptive resilience of global ecosystems.

Yet the business of agriculture is now firmly entrenched in a general trend toward globalization and corporatization. Today, more food is produced per person than at any other time on earth (Picone and Van Tassel 99) and farming at any scale is now inextricably tied to corporate consolidation of the food system. In Toronto, 50 percent of all foods flow through three corporate providers: half of Toronto's supermarkets are owned by Loblaw's (Weston), A&P (Metro), and Sobeys (Empire). As a result, we have the most oligopolistic food economy in the Western world in which a small group of powerful players effectively controls our food supply (TFPC 1994, 37; 1996, 6). Some analysts have found that such corporate consolidation contributes to higher food retail prices than would be otherwise set in a more diverse food economy (TFPC 1994, 12). The small farmer, the market gardener, and the local organic growers don't stand a chance in this system, where they cannot compete on price.

- = food desert
- = restaurant & grocery catchment areas



## Toronto's food deserts

Food deserts are large gaps in the city where it is difficult or impossible to find a grocery store or supermarket within walking distance, and where the predominant means to buy food is through fast-food outlets and higher-priced convenience stores.

Nor does the low-income consumer see any benefit: food prices in their neighborhoods are often the same as or higher than in more affluent parts of the city. When prices were averaged across Toronto, the poorest neighborhoods were second only to the wealthiest: Toronto's downtown low-income neighborhood of Regent–Moss Park had the second most expensive convenience stores, after the wealthiest area of Davisville. Notably, high-priced convenience stores dominate the food supply in Regent–Moss Park, comprising 62 percent of all food retail, while lower-priced grocers supplying more nutritious food choices represent only 2 percent of neighborhood food retail (TFPC 1996, 9). While Toronto has a wide variety of food choices, there are large gaps in the urban fabric where basic access to high-quality food is a problem. In these “food deserts” within the city—areas where it is difficult or impossible to find a grocery store or supermarket within walking distance, and where the predominant means to buy food is through fast-food outlets and higher-priced convenience stores—food prices are inversely proportional to nutritional value.

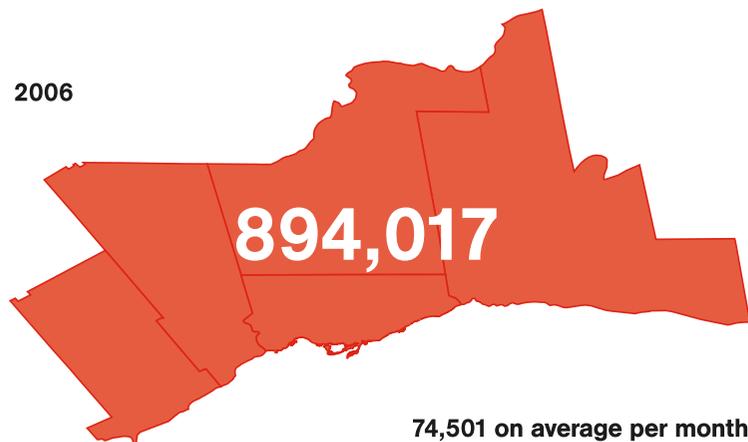
Poverty, malnutrition, and hunger are serious social harms, particularly among children, immigrants, and seniors. As in many large cities, some of the poorest areas of Toronto are also those of the highest ethno-cultural diversity, populated by newcomers struggling financially, emotionally, or culturally. Adding to their difficulties is the fact that good-quality food can be unaffordable and inaccessible in their neighborhoods. Toronto's aging population is significantly at risk too: 50 percent of Toronto residents over the age of fifty-five are considered nutritionally vulnerable, leading to reduced health outcomes (Cosgrove 27). The lack of affordable housing in Toronto (for these groups in particular, but for the average resident as well) is directly responsible for hunger: food bank users in the GTA are

paying an average of 73 percent or more of their income on rent, leaving less than \$5 a day for food. For context, social services agencies consider that 30 percent of income spent on shelter is “affordable,” and 50 percent is considered to put a person at an extreme risk of homelessness (DBFB 14). Roughly 20 percent of Toronto residents do not have sufficient income to meet their basic expenses, and thus cannot afford a healthy diet (Cosgrove 14). The hunger crisis is compounded by a growing disparity between income groups. The median family income in the poorest 10 percent of neighborhoods of Toronto has risen only 0.2 percent since 1980, whereas in the richest 10 percent of neighborhoods, it was up 23.3 percent (Heisz 18). Toronto's neighborhoods reflect this increasingly sharp division, with the country's lowest-income neighborhoods clustered around an affluent core, home to the country's wealthiest residents.

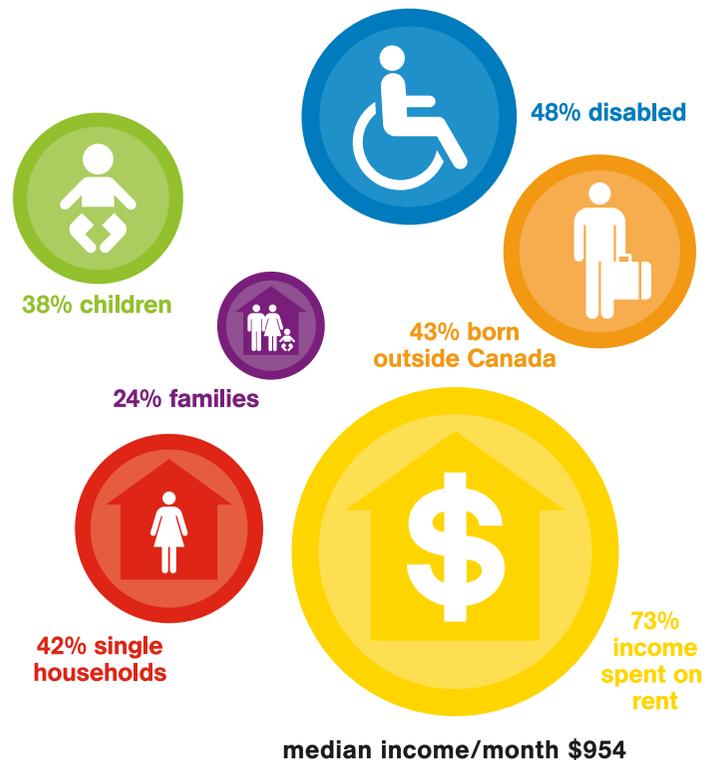
Not surprisingly, food bank use in the city has become widespread, and is increasing. The city has 106 food banks and 36 smaller food pantries (FHAC 2001a, 8), all of which are used regularly. At one time, food banks held only seasonal food drives and food bank users were a relatively small group of the decidedly poor. Today, food bank users come from a wider cross-section of the population, including a large portion of the lower middle class and about 24 percent who are classed as the “working poor”—minimum-wage earners who, despite holding regular employment, cannot afford basic necessities (DBFB 16). In 2000 a comprehensive survey of all hunger-relief and emergency food programs in Toronto found that 60,000 people use food banks each month, with 50 percent of these users having no money for food at least once a week (FHAC 2000, 9–10). Today, 75,500 people use food banks each month in the GTA: of these users 48 percent are new immigrants and 38 percent are children, 20 percent of whom go hungry at least once a week, which represents a 100

## Total number of people reliant on food banks within the GTA

2006



## The people who use the GTA's neighborhood food banks



Source: Adapted from Daily Bread Food Bank, 2006

percent increase in the past decade (DBFB 8). Increasingly, seniors are turning to food banks for help as well: 11 percent of food bank users were over sixty in 2000, compared to 6 percent in 1995 (FHAC 2000, 6). Overall, food bank use is up by 79 percent since 1995. With 1.2 million emergency meals served every month in Toronto (FHAC 2001a, 28), food security is a major issue on the urban agenda.

### **activating the edible landscape**

What can Toronto do to ensure the long-term sustainability of a safe, healthy, and accessible food supply? This is a significant challenge faced by cities all over the urbanizing world: too much reliance on food from “elsewhere” unbalances our food systems; provenance is lost, along with the ability to adapt to changes in climate or fuel prices, or to accommodate outbreaks of pests or disease. The ecological systems on which humans ultimately depend for clean air, water, and food are examples of resilient, flexible, and highly adaptive systems operating on many levels, in multiple contexts and with a lot of redundancy: they are not confined to monocultures, agricultural or otherwise. Above all, ecological systems are evolved from context and place: they are specific to the uniqueness and nuance of the landscapes in which they function. This is the critical link to be restored in urban food systems—a necessary rebalancing of food from global to local.

This is not a naïve suggestion for a return to pastoral life, but rather a recognition of how resilient systems operate. Food systems must operate at multiple scales—both global and local—using many approaches. The renewal of a robust food system will involve both small- and large-scale changes in the way our cities work. One tangible step forward would be to re-establish and reaffirm the place

of food in local landscapes. There are many ways in which cities like Toronto can activate an edible landscape, in which locally grown food is a valued and accessible resource.

Toronto’s newly declared greenbelt is a working foodshed, with over 7,000 farms producing fruit, vegetables, pork, beef, lamb, mushrooms, maple syrup, tender fruits, stone fruits, and wines (see: [www.ourgreenbelt.ca](http://www.ourgreenbelt.ca)). These lands are legally protected from urban development for the purposes of both natural heritage and agricultural conservation. Although not without controversy, metropolitan greenbelts here and in Melbourne, Canberra, Dunedin (NZ), Vancouver, and Ottawa (as well as some US urban growth boundaries) serve an important function in keeping land under cultivation in the creeping urban shadow. But to be effective, these lands must encompass dependable, high-quality farmland, not merely undevelopable land that happens to be available. Cities like Toronto need to consider seriously a concomitant approach to greenbelts for near-urban agricultural planning that includes, for example, farmland trusts, agricultural preserves, and—most important—tax incentives to keep farmers on the land and the land working. Greenbelts are a step in the right direction but alone they are not enough to restore the right of farmers and food producers to make a living in the urban fringe.

To challenge the superstores and mega-marts that dominate the consumer landscape, distribution strategies are also needed to bring food to the urban market, and the urban market to the farm. The Farm Fresh Locator, an interactive web-based map of Toronto’s foodshed, is a simple, informative directory that allows car-equipped urbanites to find and shop at local farms themselves. Organizations like Local Flavour Plus work to foster local sustainable food systems by certifying farmers and processors and linking them with local retail purchasers. Within the city, farmers’ markets are a more

traditional venue for local food: they can be informal or large-scale establishments in covered marketplaces, but they need urban planning policies and community appeal to entrench them in the fabric of the city. Community food organizations need to work closely with municipal agencies to secure urban sites for markets and nurseries and to promote the value of local produce. For example, Chicago's Growing Power runs demonstration/training gardens in Milwaukee and a kitchen potager garden in Chicago's Grant Park. In Toronto, the Evergreen Foundation has similar plans to re-use a historic postindustrial brick-making site for a native plant nursery, a farmers' market and an organic kitchen in the heart of the city. These and other community- and city-supported farmers' markets also provide an opportunity to sell produce at deep discounts, increasing access to affordable food (FHAC 2003, 14).

The direct purchase of farm goods can be organized in many ways. To help city residents connect with local farmers, community shared agriculture (CSA) projects are an innovation that works well. Each year in early spring, customers purchase a subscription or one share of the year's harvest (often organically grown) from a local farm—whether rural or urban agriculture. By paying for their produce in advance, at the beginning of the growing season, CSA shareholders provide the start-up capital necessary for farmers to purchase the year's seeds and supplies, thereby eliminating the farmer's dependence on bank loans and chemical inputs to guarantee the harvest (e.g., Toronto's Foodshare is an urban CSA while Vicki's Veggies is a local rural CSA). CSA farms are growing in both number and popularity, with now approximately a thousand CSA farms in North America (University of Massachusetts Amherst).

Country villages and regions with gastronomic specialties are now tourist destinations, marketed to urbanites as part of rural



**95 percent of cabbages, 94 percent of peas, 91 percent of field corns, and 81 percent of tomato varieties no longer exist. As we simplify our food system, we are attacking the environment's capacity for evolution and adaptation to inevitable change.**

economic development strategies. Within two hundred kilometers in either direction of Toronto there are “wine routes” and “taste trails” from Niagara to Prince Edward County, each offering a mapped route of rural agricultural discovery, with accommodation, dining, and plentiful opportunities to purchase food products directly from farm stands and town markets. This kind of niche marketing helps the producers, but doesn’t reach the population who are in greatest need of healthy, affordable food. Strategies that address food security directly are most needed.

Food security is statistically and culturally difficult to measure, but is of growing importance in urban public policy worldwide: it exists when all people in a given place, at all times, have access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs for an active and healthy life (FAO 2002). People must have such access consistently and reliably, without resorting to emergency supplies, scavenging, stealing, or other coping strategies (Committee on National Statistics 22). Experts agree that food security is a complex problem in most large cities: an affordable and consistent supply of high-quality food cannot be guaranteed to all residents without some combination of social policy, market incentives, and tools for self-reliance. Food banks should not be allowed to become a permanent, internalized feature of the food system; other strategies can be adopted. For example, subsidies for fresh food box delivery, food recycling programs from restaurants to community kitchens, urban agricultural cooperatives, community gardens, and planning policies that designate specific grocery retail locations can all make important contributions.

Urban agriculture is a significant component in fostering self-reliance for food security and in activating an edible landscape. Broadly defined, it includes any farming activity—for personal

or family use, or for profit—within or close to city limits. Rooftop gardening, container gardening, commercial greenhouses, and community gardens are all strategies of urban agriculture that can be practiced intensively in small private gardens or community plots, or extensively in commercial production in parks, greenfields or on vacant land. For example, the Toronto Community Gardening Network estimates Toronto has roughly four thousand acres of idle land that could be used for community urban agriculture (Roberts 10). The first community garden was established in Toronto in High Park in 1973, and there are now more than a hundred community gardens in the city, with 3,000 plots being used by 4,500 residents to grow fresh fruits and vegetables, each plot producing between \$200 and \$300 worth of fresh food annually (FHAC 2000, 25; 2001a, 32).

The Toronto Food Policy Council estimates that it would be possible to grow 16,700 tonnes, or about 10 percent of the city’s vegetables, within or very close to the city limits. Some of these crops could be grown in greenhouses creatively (and potentially temporarily) constructed on brownfields—vacant lands that would be otherwise unusable for food production due to contamination (FHAC 2001a, 42–43). The mosaic of urban agriculture includes many other initiatives, such as place-specific specialty gardens. There are native plant nurseries in Sydney and San Francisco and children’s gardens in Toronto and Melbourne. Toronto now has five children’s gardens for teaching and hands-on learning about gardening and nutrition (FHAC 2003, 9, 32).

While most community gardeners grow food for themselves, some donate all or a portion of their produce to food banks, while others grow produce to sell, particularly to restaurants seeking specialty produce such as Asian greens and herbs. There is a large



**One tangible step forward would be to re-establish and reaffirm the place of food in local landscapes. There are many ways in which cities like Toronto can activate an edible landscape, in which locally grown food is a valued and accessible resource.**

and growing market for ethno-culturally specific crops among restaurateurs and markets (FHAC 2003, 9, 27). While some are field crops that can be grown locally in both urban and rural areas, others are subtropical or tropical and can be cultivated in greenhouses within city limits. Small-scale local farmers are remarkably adept at seizing new market niches, and have experimented with a variety of crops over time (Bunce and Maurer 39). But they need to be connected to new networks and opportunities, such as those offered by a major city's multicultural consumer base.

Toronto *can* guarantee its own food security. Most cities are located on or near dependable farmland for the simple reason that people settled where they could reliably produce good food. Toronto is no different. Through a synergy of innovative policies, bold legislation, and creative community action, Toronto can reassert itself at the center of a plentiful foodshed and a robust food system. Redesigning an edible landscape is an important step in a long-term strategy, reconnecting food to place, and place to food. In committing ourselves to this basic act of recovery, we can regain our ability to feed ourselves and in so doing, honor the land that ultimately sustains us.

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