

Local farm once again offering up CSA shares to the community



By Mike Pickford

Albion Hills Community Farm in Caledon is offering local residents the chance to "get connected" with their food by way of a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) share.

Shannon Lee Stirling, the farm's manager, says that for the past five years it has provided the public with an opportunity to purchase fresh, ecologically grown vegetables at a reduced rate through the CSA initiative. At a cost of \$600, each share includes 20 "bountiful" weeks' worth of fresh vegetables and there would typically be a variety of between 10 and 18 items available each week for shareholders to choose from.

"Our CSA program, if that's what you want to call it, has really grown in popularity over the past couple of years as more and more people buy into the idea of investing in and eating good, nutritious, locally grown food," Ms. Stirling told the Citizen. "One of the most intimate relationships we will ever have is with our food and with the earth. By signing up to a CSA share and joining the community at Albion Hills Farm, it's really just a commitment for people to get reconnected with their food."

A not-for-profit organization, Albion Hills Community Farm boasts a 17-acre plot and is located on the Albion Hills Conservation Area near Palgrave. Its main mandate, according to Ms. Stirling, is to provide education on local food and farming.

"We do a lot of environmental stewardship-type programs," she said. "We have a community garden where people can rent plots and grow their own food, we have a youth farming club where kids, instead of doing soccer or ballet, can come in and learn all about growing food. We have different community events throughout the summer, such as pot lucks and various veggie festivals, and then, of course, we have our CSA."

Last year the farm had approximately 70 people purchase shares in its CSA and Ms. Stirling is hoping to see that number grow this season.

"I think we can push for 100 - there's enough people out there, they just need to be willing to learn about what it is we do and buy into harbouring a healthy, veggie-full diet," Ms. Stirling said.

A CSA share includes all the typical salad greens and vegetables one would think of, with different lettuces, tomatoes, cucumbers, potatoes, carrots, pumpkin and squash regularly available for pick-up. Ms. Stirling noted she typically grows 50 different salad and vegetable items in 200 different varieties over the course of a season. While people generally stop by the farm to pick up their share each week, the farm does offer delivery services to both Bolton and Orangeville for an additional one-time \$50 fee.

For those not necessarily interested in picking up mammoth amounts of produce on a weekly basis, the farm also offers a flexi-share program which, at a cost of \$300, allows people to turn up whenever they'd like to pick up a food basket, up to a maximum of 10 times a season.

"That's not as good a value as the CSA, but at least it's still getting people connected to their food - just not necessarily in a way that requires you to come back each and every week," Ms. Stirling said.

This year, Ms. Stirling is hoping to add another dynamic to the CSA share initiative by launching a weekly potluck dinner on pick-up days so as to truly embrace the feeling of community she's trying to promote through the program.

"One of our coolest additions this year is a brand new outdoor kitchen, so I was thinking? What better way to make use of that than to do a pot luck each week," Ms. Stirling said. "I think it's important to allow people the opportunity to relax when they visit our farm. Too often have I seen people rush in, pack everything up as quickly as they can and then scurry off home because they know

they have to cook dinner and get things prepped and ready. This is our way of trying to eliminate that need to rush.?

With the weather already warming up, she has been out in the farm's greenhouse, located just off Highway 9, prepping different types of eggplant for the farm. With the dog days of summer approaching, and a healthy number of residents already signed up to the program, she's confident this will be the farm's most successful CSA to date.

?So many people are coming back to community farming now, there seems to be a real resurgence in people wanting to reconnect with their food. People, generally speaking, like to be healthy and if there's one thing I can promise through this CSA initiative, considering the giant box of veggies you get each week, you're going to be healthy come the end of the 20 weeks,? Ms. Stirling said. She added, ?From what I've heard though since I took over running the CSA share four years ago, people genuinely do love it. Sometimes we hear people say it's too much food, but it's supposed to encourage people to get back in their kitchens and want to cook good, wholesome, nutritious food. To truly get the most out of a CSA you have to be someone who wants and likes to cook.? For more information or to inquire about a CSA share, call 647-981-6281, or email shannonlee@albionhillscommunityfarm.org.