

Friends of the **Greenbelt** are helping farmers find local market

Eat local, buy local. This is one of the strong messages supported by the Friends of the Greenbelt **Foundation**. It's an important one in this day and age when people are consumed with worry over things such as climate change, and food safety and security. They want to know where their food is coming from and have the chance to reconnect with their food and its producers.

"Eating local is such a vital issue for the public. News articles and even just everyday conversations seem to be focused on where our food is coming from," says Burkhard Mausberg, president of the Greenbelt **Foundation**.

A 2007 Environics poll shows 79 per cent of Ontarians prefer to buy locally grown fruits, vegetables and meats. "It's this buzz and concern that has us putting more time, money and resources into local food and the **Greenbelt**," says Mausberg.

The **Greenbelt**, a stretch of protected land measuring 1.8 million acres, wraps around the Golden Horseshoe encompassing the Niagara Escarpment, the Oak Ridges Moraine, Rouge Park and hundreds of rural towns and villages. It includes more than 7,000 farms producing an abundance of fresh fruits, vegetables, dairy and meats.

The Friends of the Greenbelt **Foundation**, established in 2005, is an independent, charitable foundation with a mandate to fund not-for-profit organizations in support of farming, the environment and rural communities located in Ontario's **Greenbelt**. The provincial government gave the Foundation \$25 million in grants to distribute over five years. To date, the Foundation has awarded \$10 million in grants.

Grantees include the Environmental





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Farm Plan (EFP), supported by the Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association, which provides training and partial funding to farmers so they can take care of the land while growing crops or raising livestock.

The Greenbelt Foundation has put \$2.4 million towards the program that directly supports farmers in the Greenbelt through increasing the cost share levels available under the EFP.

“The Environmental Farm Plan is such a success story,” says Mausberg. “Farming is a tough job and that shouldn’t go unrecognized. This program is assisting farmers financially in order to help them provide all of us with a local diet. In order for us to buy local, farmers have to be able to grow it and without financial help, it’s hard for farmers to make ends meet these days.”

The 2007 Environics poll shows 85 per cent of Ontarians strongly agree that locally grown food supports local farmers and 82 per cent say it supports the local economy. This goes to show that buying local not only helps the farmer, it helps all of us.

Growing local food is a start. The next step is getting local food onto peoples’ plates. “Going Local: Trade opportunities between farmers and chefs,” an event hosted by the GTA Culinary Tourism Working Groups and sponsored by the Greenbelt Foundation, full of guest speakers and networking opportunities for GTA restaurants and local farmers, provided one of those chances. It allowed farmers and chefs the opportunity to negotiate food contracts and discuss the possibility of sourcing more of their restaurants’ ingredients from local vendors.

Attendance at the event was phenomenal with more than 50 farmers and 100 chefs registered.

“There appears to be a real appetite in making partnerships between farmers and restaurants,” says Shelley Petrie, program director for the foundation. “The number of restaurants interested in including local food on their menus is growing and it’s clear from the turnout

and requests we’ve had for similar events that the importance of eating local and having fresh ingredients, isn’t going to slow down anytime soon.”

Having local food available in restaurants isn’t just about freshness and the quality of the produce; it’s also about our environment. Buying local produce means food travels a shorter distance and so pollution, emissions and traffic congestion are all significantly reduced.

Other Greenbelt initiatives focused on the local food movement include creating more farming opportunities for immigrants and young farmers who want to get started in the farming industry.

The University of Guelph’s Centre for Land and Water Stewardship (CLAWS) recently received a \$400,000 grant to go towards their “New Farmers to Grow; New Places to Go” initiative. CLAWS has partnered with FarmStart, the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA) and the Centre for Economic Development for Immigrant Women. The project aims to support new farmers in the Greenbelt and to connect immigrant communities to the Greenbelt as a source of local food production, providing farmer training support through “incubator farm” facilities and co-op farming arrangements in the Greenbelt.

Local Food Plus (LFP) is another Foundation grantee. Their main focus is creating local sustainable food systems through partnerships that link farmers and processors with local purchasers. They’ve made plenty of progress in the past year in getting the word out on local food. LFP has created local food partnerships with the University of Toronto, Toronto’s Fiesta Farms supermarket, Il Fornello restaurants and Fermentations winery and others. One of their latest projects is a partnership with M.E. and Suzie’s, a restaurant serving fresh Ontario cuisine in Port Stanley.

Heading into its second year, the non-profit group says being able to tell farmers and potential business partners

about these success stories helps motivate more of them to get involved.

“If we continue with these victories, we expect our outreach and awareness to soar,” says Mike Schreiner, vice-president of LFP. “Over the past year, the interest in local food has skyrocketed and this is reflected in the amount of interest farmers and the general public have taken in LFP. Local sustainable food reflects a set of values people want to be a part of – quality food at fair prices for farmers, rather than cheap food shipped longer distances.”

According to LFP, more than one quarter of the 52 certified farms are **Greenbelt** farms.

“We’re interested in growing a local food system in the Golden Horseshoe,” says Mausberg. “By partnering with organizations like LFP, we try to support our local farmers who just want a fair price for their product.”

To be locally certified by LFP, farmers in the program work on the following:

- Employ sustainable production systems that conserve soil and water while displacing harmful synthetic pesticides and fertilizers
- Protect and enhance wildlife habitat and biodiversity on working farm landscapes
- Provide safe and fair working conditions for on-farm labour
- Provide healthy and humane care for livestock

- Reduce on-farm energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions through energy conservation, recycling, minimal packaging, and local sales

To make it more convenient for the average Ontario consumer to find their local source of food, the foundation has put together the first ever My Local **Greenbelt** Guide. The free, colourful guide lists hundreds of farmers’ markets, wineries and restaurants that carry locally grown items. The guide is divided up by region and contains more than 60 pages of listings.

“We want to make it as easy as possible for people to find what it is they’re looking for whether it’s where they can pick up local cheeses, baked goods or when their local fair and festivals are taking place,” says Mausberg. “This guide showcases everything the **Greenbelt** has to offer and it’s only going to get bigger and better.”

The guide will include an online database this spring so if there is a local eatery or on-farm market you don’t see listed, it can be added for no charge, to the existing list (see www.OurGreenbelt.ca).

“It’s initiatives like this comprehensive guide that make me proud to be part of Ontario’s world-leading **Greenbelt**,” says Mausberg. “One look at the diversity and volume of local food providers in this book tells me Ontario’s **Greenbelt** is something special.” 🍎

The Greenbelt is a stretch of protected land measuring 1.8 million acres that wraps around the Golden Horseshoe, encompassing the Niagara Escarpment, the Oak Ridges Moraine, Rouge Park and hundreds of rural towns and villages, including the Holland Marsh. It includes more than 7,000 farms producing an abundance of fresh fruits, vegetables, dairy and meats.



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As part of the growing and eating local food movement, Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation sponsored a networking event for restaurants in the Greater Toronto Area and local farmers. It allowed farmers and chefs the opportunity to negotiate food contracts and discuss the possibility of sourcing more of their restaurants' ingredients from local vendors. Attendance at the event was phenomenal with more than 50 farmers and 100 chefs registered.

A recent poll by Environics shows 85 per cent of Ontarians strongly agree that locally grown food supports local farmers and 82 per cent say it supports the local economy. This shows that buying local food helps not only the farmers but all of the local community.

