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LOCAL FOOD

Wanted: Real live farmers for city markets

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FOOD EDITOR

They're sprouting faster than weeds in a field, but some of the farmers' markets popping up around Toronto are short one thing: farmers.

"There aren't enough farmers to go around," confirms Bob Chorney, executive director of Farmers Markets Ontario, a provincial association that represents 135 members.

After a \$1 million injection from the Greenbelt Foundation, Chorney hired a recruiter in March to help find the growers necessary to make sure Ontarians buy local when they visit one of the associa-

tion's four new MyMarkets in Toronto.

"He's managed to find about 15 farmers for us," Chorney says. "It's really tough. We set the bar really high."

For years, Chorney has led the charge against what he calls "hucksters" — people who buy imported fruit and veg at the Ontario Food Terminal and pass it off at farmers' markets as local produce.

"These were guys who didn't have

a dime invested in a farm," he says.

So he developed the MyMarket brand, which made its debut last year at Liberty Village and the Woodbine Centre, where every vendor was inspected and certified by Farmers Markets Ontario to ensure they grew everything they sold.

This year, three new operations have earned MyMarket status: the

FARMERS continued on L11



Farmers' markets missing one key element

FARMERS from L1

Hospital for Sick Children on University Ave., the East Lynn Farmers' Market on the Danforth near Woodbine, and Bloor-Borden in the city's Annex neighbourhood. Liberty Village will also use the logo again this year, while Chorney decided to close Woodbine Centre because vendors did not fare well in that location.

Recruiter Bernie Solymar says part of the problem of finding farmers is the strict rules attached to the MyMarket designation. Cheese is almost always missing, because most cheesemakers buy their milk from someone else, and that isn't allowed under Farmers Markets Ontario rules.

Solymar has a beef farmer who makes burgers and other food products, and whose neighbour does the same with pork. But the beef farmer can't bring his neighbour's products to a MyMarket because he didn't produce it, even though it would cut down on transportation and labour costs.

Those are two of the top reasons farmers give for passing on Toronto markets, says Solymar, an agricultural consultant who runs Earth-Tramper Consulting Inc.

"Number 1 is the distance to get to Toronto . . . and the labour to have someone to run the produce in," he says. "The occasional one doesn't like the certification; they don't like people looking at their paperwork."

What the shortage of farmers re-

ally means is fewer vendors and less choice for buyers.

But Solymar feels confident the MyMarket board of directors will eventually address some of these problems. "It makes sense to start off strict."

He has about 400 growers or producers on his list and, while some don't yet meet the requirements to sell at a MyMarket, they are keen to earn certification. If the farm is already certified organic or has a designation from Local Food Plus (a Toronto-based non-profit organization that certifies locally grown food), it automatically qualifies, Chorney says.

Other Toronto markets also have had trouble recruiting growers to fill their stalls. At the new Sorauren Park Farmers' Market near Roncesvalles, organizers contacted 60 people to ask if they wanted to set up a table in the park on Mondays, and now have about 20 confirmed for the May 26 opening. Market manager Filip Haderer says more than half will be farmers in order to meet Farmers Markets Ontario requirements for membership, although it doesn't meet MyMarket criteria because it is allowing local businesses such as Baluchon, a fair-trade coffee shop on Sorauren Ave., to set up a table and sell joe.

"We have a broader perspective," he says. "We support farmers and we support processors. . . . Most of them get their food from farmers."

At Plan B Organic Farm near

Flamborough, Melanie Golba, her husband Alvaro Venturelli and his brother Rodrigo turned down an invitation to sell at the four MyMarkets run by Farmers Markets Ontario. Instead, they will set up a stall Mondays at Sorauren Park.

"We don't have four more vehicles," says Golba. "It takes time away from the farm, too. The more markets you do, the less farming you do."

The farm is about 150 kilometres round trip from downtown, and they say the business can be speculative. "If it rains, no one comes."

At Sorauren Park, a Monday soccer league for 4- to 6-year-olds will guarantee exposure to 300 or more families, and that was worth it to them.

At the same time, the Plan B farmers recognize that the main reason farmers are disappearing is because they can't make a living. Most are moving away from fruit and vegetable farming and into cash crops or meat production. And their land has become vulnerable to developers who dangle big bucks before cash-strapped growers.

"In the last five years we've lost more than 20,000 farms in Canada," says Alvaro Venturelli, adding the average income for farmers in 15 of the last 20 years was \$5,000, while the average income for farmers in Ontario was minus \$16,000 last year.

"We're seeing generations of farm equity lost."