

LOCAL News Desk, 905-526-3420

Fresh produce for city food banks

Hamilton Harvest program to partner with organic farm

BY PAUL MORSE

We all know that fresh vegetables and fruit are a crucial part of a healthy diet.

But what do you do if you are a food bank and are trying to feed over 18,000 Hamiltonians in need each month?

It's hard enough to raise the tons of nutritious food needed, but food banks struggle even more to find ready supplies of fresh produce.

The solution? Grow it yourself.

This summer, Hamilton will be one of five communities across the province to test a Ontario food bank coalition program in supply sustainability.

The Ontario Association of Food Banks (OAFB) has turned to a small but prestigious agricultural business in Flamborough called Plan B Organic Farm.

Already well-known for selling certified organic produce through a share box program to more than 1,000 customers, Plan B will now cultivate 25 acres of onions, carrots and potatoes specifically for nine local food banks.

The program is officially known as Hamilton Harvest.

"We're thinking of calling it Plan C," said a smiling Alvaro Venturelli, who owns and operates the farm with wife Melanie Golba and his brother, Rodrigo.

OAFB has come up with four ways to get fresh food into the food banks, including planned harvests



TED BRELLISFORD,
THE HAMILTON
SPECTATOR

Alvaro Venturelli with wife Melanie Golba, daughter Maia and son Luca seen in an onion field, one of a total of 25 acres devoted to produce being grown exclusively for food banks in Hamilton. The Plan B farm hopes to grow about 100,000 pounds of food this year.

— growing it directly for food banks.

The first is "gleaning," where farmers allow food banks to go over an already harvested field and retrieve missed produce. The second is redirecting surplus farm produce destined to be scrapped, while the third is increasing volunteer sustained farm donations.

Under the at-cost planned harvest, the association pays farmers the actual cost of production.

"So, rather than say, 'How much can you grow these for?', they are saying, 'Hey, how much does it cost for your time as a farmer?'" Golba, 36, said.

Planned harvests merge two income crises under one program — low income inaccessibility to fresh food and shaky incomes for small family farms.

"It's exciting because it gets down to the nitty-gritty issues of food security," Golba said.

"Farmers are suffering, people can't get fresh food, how do we bring them together?"

With a \$37,500 budget funded through donations to OAFB, Plan B is seeding fields from an area farm to grow potatoes and onions, followed by carrots and other crops.

Farmers with overflow product used to be among the key suppliers to food banks, Venturelli, 39, said.

"But we've lost so many family farms in Canada that we don't have the farmers to have enough charity to go around."

When OAFB first turned to Golba and Venturelli for expert advice about setting up planned harvests, the organic farmers suggested asking large farms first to take advan-

tage of greater economies of scale and potentially lower price points.

"But none of the farms wanted to do it, they just wanted them to buy from them," Venturelli said. "So they came back to us and told us they'd rather help us develop our farm."

"We also think that this organic food should not just be for the rich. To me, that's a joke."

Plan B hopes to grow about 100,000 pounds of food for the food banks this year.

You can donate to food banks electronically through the Internet on hamiltonfoodshare.org or oafb.ca.

For information about Plan B Organic Farm, go to planborganic-farms.ca.

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