



# Local Food Global People

Community Summary Report

Insights from immigrants growing food in the Greater Toronto Area. Compiled and condensed by Jillian Linton.

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## Landmark Local Food Legislation

### 2011 – Toronto Local Food Procurement Policy

*Toronto's City Council adopts a policy committing to source food locally, defined as at least 51% grown and 80% processed in Ontario.*

### 2013 – Local Food Boundaries Changed

*The federal regulatory body changes the definition of local to "food produced in the province or territory in which it is sold, or food sold across provincial borders within 50 km of the originating province or territory"*

### 2013 – Local Food Act

*Ontario's Ministry of Agriculture passes Bill 36, which initiates the Local Food Act to support local food economies through significant funding, regional targets and amended taxation law.*

## Introduction

In Ontario, there has been a grassroots, community led local food movement for decades, however in recent years there has been increasing political momentum aimed at developing local food policy and building local food networks. In 2013, the provincial government endorsed the movement with the establishment of the provincial Local Food Act that introduced legislation and provided multimillion-dollar funding towards "local food economies and systems" (2013). The Ministry of Agriculture also encouraged individual municipalities to introduce their own strategies, policies, programs and partnerships aimed at building and sustaining local food networks (2013). Toronto has also committed to a local food procurement strategy for public entities and offers its residents advice aimed at increasing their consumption of local food. As local food and agricultural policy continues to be shaped in Ontario, and more specifically in the Greater Toronto Area, it is important that a variety of stakeholders are consulted and allowed to shape this process.

Ontario has 53.3% of all the immigrants in the country, and considering recent immigrants are at a higher risk of food insecurity than the Canadian born population (Tarasuk et al., 2016), it is important that new food policy consider the unique experiences of this population. Research was undertaken over the course of the 2016 growing season to speak with immigrants currently growing food in the Greater Toronto Area, to determine their opinions of local food and their experiences as immigrants navigating the Canadian food system. This summary report condenses the information learned from these participants and presents key findings and recommendations.

## Consultations

Interviews took place with immigrant farmers and growers over the growing season, beginning in the spring and finishing in the fall of 2016. The majority of the farmers and growers were affiliated with McVean Incubator Farm and Black Creek Community Farm (BCCF). The interviews were followed by a meeting held in December of 2016 with participants and community members to discuss the comments, opinions and concerns raised during the individual interviews. The information included within this report is drawn from the interviews and the December meeting.

The participants came from the Caribbean, Africa, Asia, South America and Europe, the majority were racialized immigrants, and none were recent immigrants.<sup>1</sup> Half of the participants grew food as their primary form of employment or as part of their jobs, while the other half grew food as a hobby or in their leisure time. None of the participants owned or lived on their land and all the participants farmed and lived in urban or peri-urban zones. This report does not offer perspectives from immigrants that have settled and farm in rural areas or do not follow organic growing methods, who likely may have their own opinions, challenges, and concerns.

**BLACK  
CREEK  
COMMUNITY  
FARM**



**FARMSTART**  
supporting a new generation of farmers

Black Creek Community Farm is an urban agriculture project founded by Everdale, Food Share and Afri-Can Food Basket. The farm is located at Jane and Steeles in Toronto and has organic fields, a greenhouse, food forest, beehives, poultry coop and outdoor education space.

McVean Incubator Farm is a farm incubator program launched by FarmStart. The program offers mentorship, training and support to new farmers as they establish their farm businesses. The farm plots are in Brampton.

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<sup>1</sup> The federal government defines recent immigrants as those who arrived in Canada in the previous five years.

# Findings

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## Reasons for Growing

Participants chose to grow for a variety of reasons, not only to have access to ethnic foodstuffs. They cited **taste, quality, freshness and safety of food** as a major factor for wanting to grow their own produce, as it allowed them to avoid buying from stores that they could not trust or food whose origins could not be verified. Growing food was also a way **to continue familial cultural traditions** they had learned as children and pass them on to their own families.

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*“When you go out there and start farming it’s like you’re a totally different person, you know? You’re in tune with nature, you’re in tune with life.”*

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Many enjoyed the activity of **being in nature and having access to a green space** that was distinct from city parks, while also being surrounded by a **tight-knit community** of growers. Some participants noted that even if they did not always feel Canadian or at home in Canada, they were happy with the community that they had built in their neighbourhoods and on their shared farm plots or gardens.

## Resources

For those interested in getting started farming, **the internet and the municipal public library system** were crucial for learning about Canada’s growing season, where to find community plots, and what plants thrive in this climate. Many mentioned finding their current plots through the internet and using books and materials from the public library to teach themselves more about growing.

Several took advantage of **OMAFRA course offerings, advice, and conferences** as a way to learn Ontario’s specific climate and farming season, however in most cases this required taking time off of work, travelling to a rural area, and/or paying to participate in the courses. A smaller number were able to receive funding either from the provincial or municipal government to train or learn more about growing, however in some of these cases the programs they accessed were later discontinued. Others took advantage of non-governmental resources through farmers associations, charitable foundations, NGO’s or non-profits as a way of accessing resources, grants, support or scholarships.

Overwhelmingly however, both leisure growers and farmers respectively credited **farm organizations and/or farm incubators** as being integral to their journey in starting to grow food more seriously in Toronto. These organizations **provided the physical space to grow, as well as advice, training and a supportive community** for participants to learn from and thrive.

## Farming as a business

The immigrant farmers who participated in this research project were all small-scale organic farmers and experienced many of the challenges reported by other small-scale farmers in Ontario. Due to the challenges related to remaining solvent, **farmers often relied on a secondary source of income, self-exploitation and/or volunteer labour to make ends meet.** Participants also pointed out that **difficulty finding land and accessing loans or credit** were major barriers to starting their businesses. None of these immigrants could inherit land from family members and since they farmed in locations near to major cities, the cost of land was exorbitant and far beyond what

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*'oh, we had a great year, we made \$32,000," but if you bring it to like hourly salary, I was literally paying myself \$3/hour to grow the food and that's not sustainable.*

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they could afford. None of the farmers interviewed owned their own land, but **several had used farm incubator programs or farm organizations as a way to first access farm plots.** They stated that without these organizations they might still be looking for land or may have given up on their farming projects altogether. Credit was equally difficult to access as farming is considered a high-risk venture by banks and so most applicants are unable to qualify for loans. None of the immigrants interviewed were able to rely on familial resources or inheritance to begin their businesses, which can be an important resource for new farmers (Ngo and Brklacich, 2014), so they were more likely to be reliant on government funding or to need alternative work to build up their savings before starting to farm.

Those farmers growing food as a source of income employed several strategies to succeed:

- Farmers noted that they relied on **diversification** (growing a wide range or different kinds of crops) to distinguish themselves from others on the market. This could mean growing heirloom varieties, produce not commonly grown in the region (sometimes referred to as world crops i.e. okra, callaloo, *calabaza*), young cuttings (i.e. micro-greens), or also offering a variety of non-edible items (i.e. flowers or decorative gourds).
- Many farmers produced not only vegetables and fruit, but additional **value-added products**, such as pickles, preserves, or sauces, that often attracted more customers and distinguished them from other suppliers. Some also served prepared food made from their own fruits and vegetables. Offering prepared food and processed items alongside raw produce often allowed farmers to gain larger profit margins and have more lucrative market days, however the vending location and infrastructure must allow for this kind of activity.
- Several farmers also spoke of **cooperation and collaboration** with neighbouring farmers throughout the growing season. They spoke of sharing knowledge with their fellow farmers in group meetings or sharing and exchanging produce throughout the season to diversify their offerings to consumers. Aside from knowledge sharing and produce exchange, some discussed eventual plans to form cooperatives to ensure stability, mitigate risk, and share costs.

## Racialization in the Farm Community

Participants who identified as black were vocal about experiences of racial discrimination that they encountered as part of the larger farm and growing community of the GTA. Experiences included but were not limited to **micro-aggressions, a lack of representation, exclusion from certain spaces and fewer opportunities**. Participants often felt they were at a disadvantage because they were not included in many beneficial events, spaces or activities that other non-racialized farmers benefitted from. These participants all expressed a feeling of fatigue from always having to fight to be recognized or to create space for themselves.

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*“Race plays into everything. Let’s just say I don’t think a lot has changed, I think there is tremendous tolerance, but I don’t think a lot has changed...”*

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## Recommendations

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The recommendations listed below are compiled directly from the suggestions offered by the participants themselves. These were the issues deemed most important to improving the landscape of food and farming in peri-urban environments.

### What?

**Sustained government training and support for farmers in the planning and establishment of infrastructure for their farms, but also in the continued skills necessary for running a successful farm business.** New farmers have difficulty navigating the early years of farming, both logistically and financially. Once established, smaller farms often rely on direct marketing models and cooperation with other farmers to remain solvent.

### How?

*Increased government support for farm incubators and farm training organizations in urban and peri-urban locations where the majority of immigrants are located to help new farmers get started. Guidance (i.e. accessible workshops and best practices guides) for those already farming to help them develop their businesses, establish farmers’ markets, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) models, and cooperative business models.*

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## What?

**Government subsidies for small to medium scale farmers, particularly for farmers of colour and those farmers growing in and supplying low income, underserved communities.** These subsidies would help offset transportation costs or the cost of hiring employees to facilitate distribution.

Participants point out that these communities benefit from having access to fresh, healthy produce in their neighbourhoods, but it can be difficult to find a pricing model that sustains farming enterprises without pricing out vulnerable community members.

## How?

*Continued and increased government subsidies for farmers and farm organizations providing services and goods in these communities to help to offset some of the costs for these farmers and help maintain a healthy, local food source for low income residents.*

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## What?

**Aid in navigating existing funding opportunities.** While some government subsidies and funding programs exist, they can be difficult to access for new immigrant farmers. They often require long application processes with difficult terms of eligibility that can deter those unfamiliar with the bureaucratic process. For example, Growing Forward 2 is one of the government's largest funding programs, yet the primer document which explains the fund and best practices for applying is 76 pages long.

## How?

*Increasing grant writing workshops aimed specifically at immigrants and new farmers could help increase the likelihood of these populations receiving available funding, particularly for those who have English as a second language. Increasing the amount of information easily accessible online is also important for those who may be unable to attend workshops in person or travel to government offices.*

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## What?

**More growing spaces in urban and peri-urban locations.** Participants were clear that more green spaces were needed to fill the needs of other communities and that the various levels of government should be working together to ensure that government owned land is being used for similar urban farm projects or peri-urban farm plots. Many of the participants I spoke to mentioned being turned away or encountering long waitlists for community garden plots, greenhouses and other farm spaces. Others looking to farm commercially spoke of the impossibility of affording their own plots, despite living near to some of the best farmland in Canada.

## How?

*Rezoning and opening up vacant and underused government owned land in urban and peri-urban areas to organizations and individuals willing to use the land for agriculture would increase growing spaces, while also potentially improving the quality of the soil and the landscape of the neighbourhood.*

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## What?

**Education for newcomers, youth and those interested in starting to grow.** Many of the participants first learned to grow as children in their country of origin. Often, they learned from their families, the school systems in their countries of origin or a combination of the two. Several participants expressed interest in increasing the education opportunities for youth and newcomers specifically in the realm of food and agriculture. Participants suggested introducing food and agriculture as a basic part of the school curriculum for children and training newcomers in a variety of food related topics, such as the growing season in Canada, where to access healthy food, and basic nutrition.

## How?

*Integrating information on growing opportunities and agriculture into newcomer workshops and public school curricula on a wider scale and increasing the number of schools with connected farm or garden programs would help more new immigrants of all ages learn about the options available to them.*

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## What?

### **Linking agriculture and local food with justice for all.**

Participants felt that local food policy and programming should not only focus on the production of fruits and vegetables, but should be intertwined with a greater mission of social justice. They suggested that local food programming should include information on other issues directly

connected to food and agriculture, such as: the issue of temporary migrant workers, food access and the policing of food in low income communities, environmental sustainability concerns, and Indigenous political struggles for land.

## How?

*Connecting agriculture to these other social issues through policy is useful in building a local food system that is beneficial on a variety of levels and considerate of the various struggles faced by different communities throughout the Greater Toronto Area.*

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*“I feel that once you leave out the disenfranchised and the dispossessed people from an apparent organic movement then its not really a movement that is bringing along the fullness of organic agriculture.”*

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## Citations

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