

# Backyard farming in the GTA

By Catherine Porter

Erica Lemieux's farm is in a High Park backyard. Eight of them, to be precise. Cobbled together, that makes for a quarter-acre.

"The backyards here are just asking to be farmed," she says, leading me around to the back of a giant house on High Park Ave. and down its long yard, where she is double-digging beds for her first crop of vegetables.

That's right, crop. Lemieux isn't a gardener, she's an urban farmer. Starting next month, she'll be delivering her Easter egg radishes and sugar snap peas to west end restaurants and the Sorauren Farmers' Market near Dundas W. and Lansdowne Ave.

In fact, she'll be one of three Toronto farmers selling vegetables at the Monday afternoon market this season. Add to that two Brampton farmers and the group from Woodbridge, and almost half the produce will come from the Greater Toronto Area.

"We were thinking about having a grown-in-Toronto table," says market manager Ayal Dinner. "Now, it's going to be more of a grown-in-Toronto section."

How cool is that?

I love the idea of eating North York carrots and South Etobicoke mustard greens for so many reasons. I'd be paying my

neighbour instead of a distant Californian conglomerate. I wouldn't have to worry about gender-bending herbicides like atrazine. And there are none of those pesky carbon emissions.

I see local farmers as our insurance in a globalized marketplace. When oil hits \$150 a barrel, they'll make sure we won't starve.

Plus there is all that useless boring grass spread out around the city atop the country's best loam. (From the top of the CN Tower, you can see a third of the country's best farmland on a clear day, most of it sprouting concrete parking lots and glass towers.)

"Look at how beautiful this soil is," Lemieux says, digging into a bed of fluffy dirt the colour of a chocolate milkshake.

The inspiration for Lemieux's City Seed Farms came last summer as she was visiting an urban farmer growing food in backyards around Kelowna. She rushed home, printed a brochure and dropped it off at houses in her High Park neighbourhood. Within a few days she had 11 offers from homeowners willing to part with pieces of their sunny yards in exchange for a weekly basket of produce.

"They have the land but no time. I have lots of time but no land," says Lemieux, 26.

Once you think it through, intensive farming in the city makes total sense. All that asphalt that absorbs the sun's heat makes for a longer growing season. There are no trucking or traffic issues — you live in the market. You don't have to worry about

rain, there's the garden hose. And working fast-growing, high-end crops on small plots means there's no need for expensive tractors or plows. Testing all the yards for lead and mercury has been her second-biggest expense, but her only major buy has been a metal wagon, custom-built on the Toronto Islands no less, to hitch to her bicycle for her produce. She plans to pedal all her produce to market.

"The only motorized tool I have is a Rototiller," she says.

One of the restaurants to which she plans to sell vegetables has offered Lemieux all its fruit and vegetable scraps for the giant compost bins she has set up in her parents' backyard, along with a small greenhouse. She has picked up coffee grounds — good for growing tomatoes — from a couple of local coffee shops. So, crunching into one of her yellow carrots this summer, you'll be part of a tiny, perfect ecosystem.

Lemieux isn't the first idealistic young urbanite to go all *Walden Pond* in Toronto. The FoodCycles crew are heading into their third season, farming a half-hectare up in Downsview Park. Despite their growing customer base, they still aren't making a profit.

"Farming is like any other business — you need a marketing plan, a financial strategy, a risk strategy," says David Wild, a FoodCycles board member who, after six months of farming, returned to his medical writing job.

Even with a plan, you are likely to lose money. Despite the craze

over local food, the average Ontario farmer still nets only \$25,000, which is why most have second jobs. It's also why their kids are fleeing to the city. The average farmer is 53. We need all the farmers we can get, in the city and beyond.

Lemieux's hero, Curtis Stone, made \$20,000 in his first year of farming in Kelowna backyards. He, like her, had no experience other than tree planting. This summer, he's aiming for \$60,000. If he can do it, she says, so can she.

"I want to show urban farming can be a for-profit business," she says.

I can't wait to try her radishes this summer. I wish her luck.