

Growing interest in gardening for food in Weston-Mount Dennis



Photo: children in the gardening program check out a worm in a water can at the Eglinton Flats park community garden last week. Above, Florence Li, of Toronto Green Community, shows a mint plant to Nickel Bynne, 8, and other children from the gardening program.

Community gardens have been experiencing a growing interest by residents who desire fresh, organic and affordable food.

"I'm finding that there's a large need for people to just try to provide some of their own food, because of that I think it's becoming increasingly popular," said Charlyn Ellis, the unofficial volunteer co-coordinator of Emmett Avenue Community Garden in Eglinton Flats Park.

Two community gardens in York – Good Soil, located behind St. David's Anglican Church, and the Emmett Avenue Community Garden – offer garden plots to anyone who applies for one, if plots are available. Emmett Avenue already has about eight applicants on the wait list for next season and Good Soil confirms they have typically had more demand for plots than they can accommodate.

Nastassja Harris and Garcia Robinson, garden co-coordinators at Good Soil, believe affordable organic food is not easily accessible in their area. Community gardening fills a need, they said.

"I think that food security is definitely an issue in this community and access to affordable healthy food is definitely a priority for this community," said Robinson.

Ellis has witnessed the same need among her gardeners.

"There's this one woman who's had two children and they both (have) fed off the garden. She actually cannot afford organic stuff for her babies but she knows, every summer at least, she can grow," she said.

"A lot of people are realizing that gardening is a lot more about food security than anything else."

North York Harvest Food Bank completed a project early this year called the Food Friendly Neighborhood Plan. It evaluated access to food in three Toronto communities, including the Weston-Mount Dennis neighbourhood. The project found that residents in this area said food banks and meal programs were inaccessible and overcrowded, and local farmers' markets were too costly.

In its final report card, it allotted Weston-Mount Dennis a grade of C in food skills and growing. While the neighbourhood graded higher than the Lawrence Heights and Bathurst-Finch communities, which received an F and D respectively, residents surveyed in the study said gardens were not well advertised to the public.

North York Harvest Food Bank's manager of agency relations, Michael Friedman, said while Weston-Mount Dennis has a lot more gardening and food programs than the other two neighbourhoods in the study, outreach is a problem.

"Generally we found a disconnect between what the service providers were offering and what resources were out there and residents' knowledge of them," he said.

“I know, just in conversation with residents that we did in our research, like a lot of people weren’t aware where gardens were, which organizations offered gardens – some of them were right around the corner and they didn’t know.”

Ellis, who co-ordinates the garden as a volunteer, admitted she would like to do more outreach, but it would require more of her time, and she is already tending to the garden nearly four days a week.

For next year, however, Emmett Avenue is considering adding plots to cater to demand.

“So we’ve decided that maybe at least eight more plots can be added and we are going to make them smaller. There is such a larger demands that we’re thinking of making the plots smaller so more people can access the garden,” she said.

One point all parties can agree on is the benefit of community gardening.

“I think the best thing for me is just being able to see community members meet and just talk,” said Harris.

“We have people from different cultures and backgrounds, they speak different languages but when they’re in the garden, they can’t help but say hi to each other and find some way to communicate.

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