

Urban farming takes root

Photographer Gordon Beck and reporter David Johnston explore a corner of Montreal Island where agriculture flourishes.

DAVID JOHNSTON, The Gazette
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Of all the things people on Montreal Island go to bed worrying about, how to stop deer from eating the leaves on a commercial beet crop shouldn't be one of them.

But precisely such a dilemma has been bothering Alison Hackney of Senneville in recent weeks as she wraps up her autumn harvest after the wettest growing season in 60 years.

Hackney is a farmer - a farmer on the island of Montreal, no less. That's rare enough in itself; but so, too, are those deer that have come to regard her 15-hectare farm as their own private fast-food outlet.

"They can be pesky," Hackney said.

On the other hand, they are not as rare as they were 30 years ago, when galloping urbanization wiped out the last cluster of family farms and alleged deer sightings were often more urban legend than reality.

Today, the farming way of life is sowing the seeds of an agricultural revival on the western end of the island, thanks to growing demand for organic produce.

Created in 1996, Hackney's Ferme du Fort Senneville has helped pave the way more recently for Stephen Homer's 25-hectare Ferme du Zephyr and David Merson's two-hectare Ferme Mange-Tout. Collectively, these three organic farms in Senneville, population 864, produce a wide range of vegetables and fruits without the use of artificial herbicides or pesticides that are common in mainstream commercial agriculture.

The principal customer base for organic farms are individuals who pay between \$300 and \$600 at the beginning of the growing season for a weekly basket of produce. In addition, Hackney sells at the Saturday produce market in Ste. Anne de Bellevue that ended its six-month season yesterday. Homer, meanwhile, supplies two Notre Dame de Grace specialty stores as well as 357c, a private club in Old Montreal founded and owned by high-tech entrepreneur Daniel Langlois.

"Montreal Island is one of the best places for an organic farm to be, because the customer base is so handy," Homer said.

Together, the three organic farms in Senneville represent the future of farming on the island, if, indeed, farming is to have a future.

Elsewhere, there's a 100-hectare apple orchard in Senneville that exists primarily as a municipal tax writeoff, and a farm in Pierrefonds - involving the Bibeaus, one of the West Island's oldest farm families - on land leased by the Transport Department that is slated to be used for road-network expansion.

The three organic farms occupy 42 hectares of land, or the equivalent of 20 Canadian football fields. That's a lot, or not very much, depending on one's perspective. But with organic farming, you don't need a lot of land because it's not how much you can grow, but how you grow it that counts most with customers, who are willing to pay a premium for organic products. The traditional economy-of-scale advantages of large-scale commercial farming don't apply across the board, as they once did.

Whether this budding agricultural revival in Senneville leads to something bigger might depend, of course, on whether demand for organic produce continues to grow. But if it does, there will be no shortage of farm land on the western end of the island to accommodate agricultural growth.

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For one thing, the western end of the island still has agricultural land, albeit fallow land, that continues to be protected from development under provincial law. Those lands, totaling more than 1,000 hectares, are in Senneville, Ste. Anne de Bellevue and Pierrefonds. There are also substantial tracts of farmland that have long since been rezoned for residential or industrial use, but lie dormant today.

The image of abandoned farmhouses and crumbling barns is common in the northwest part of the West Island. A good example is the landscape along Ste. Marie Rd. in Ste. Anne de Bellevue, north of Highway 40, east and west of Morgan Blvd.

Rusted garden tools, tattered mail-order encyclopedia volumes and pairs of ancient leather shoes lie scattered on these properties as evidence of a West Island that has long ago disappeared.

Hackney has been seeing deer all season. They ate the hearts out of her lettuce heads during the summer, and more recently they have been eating the leaves on her beets. That's a pain, because without the leaves it's hard to find the valuable vegetable roots hidden in the soil.

So that got Hackney thinking, and she came up with this idea: "A single strand of electrified wire with some tin foil on the wire and some peanut butter on the tin foil; the deer puts its tongue on the peanut butter, then runs away." She used it, and it seems to be working very well.

These days, Hackney has been using her two Belgian horses, Fanny and Fine, with help from an off-island farmer, Claude Gemme, to till a winter crop into her fields to prevent winter soil erosion. She figures she'll finish for the season around Nov. 15.

The horses are led out of a stable a few metres from Highway 40, near the mouth of the Ile aux Tourtes Bridge. The audio backdrop of Canada's second-largest city gearing up for work is the only sensory indication to suggest this pastoral scene is anything but classically rural.



Alison Hackney and Claude Gemme prepare to till a winter crop into the fields to prevent winter soil erosion. Hackney figures she'll finish for the season around Nov. 15.

Photograph by : GORDON BECK, THE GAZETTE