
FROM THE GOOD EARTH

HOW MELLOW IS THE MARSH

BY LAURA YOUNG



The neighbourhood is as multicultural as they come. A Korean family is flanked by Italian neighbours on one side, and Polish on the other; Chinese, Ukrainian, Pakistani, German, Vietnamese, Dutch, Portuguese, Hungarian and Italian are living side by side. Is this Toronto's Annex or Kensington Market area? Surprisingly, it's vegetable country – Holland Marsh – one of the prime agricultural regions in Canada, and part of Ontario's Greenbelt.

Contrary to popular belief, Holland Marsh was not reclaimed by the Dutch. The 22,000-acre area located in what is today Simcoe County and York Region was named after Canada's first Surveyor General, Major Samuel Holland. The first polder (an area of land reclaimed from a body of water and protected by dikes) created here, visible from Highway 400 and located in Bradford West Gwillimbury and King Township, was originally reclaimed in 1928 by a syndicate of landowners of various nationalities. Most of the Dutch settlers arrived after the Second World War.

Why bother reclaiming marshland when there were millions of acres of class 1 mineral soil in Southern Ontario at the time? Mineral soil is derived from rock, with varying degrees of sandiness and compaction. Muck soil, conversely, is in a category all its own, made of composted plant matter that is soft and spongy and holds water and nutrients near the roots of the plant. And it already contains phosphorus, an essential component of fertilizer. The ground gives way to the grow-

ing root vegetables, allowing them to grow longer and straighter. The microclimate of the Holland Marsh valley combines with soil conditions to make for crisper leafy greens. You won't find crops that prefer sandy soil, like corn and strawberries, here. It's root vegetables and greens that flourish in this soil – over forty different varieties – as well as flowers, sprouts and herbs, and even bonsai trees. The crops are as multicultural as the immigrants, who for decades have made the pilgrimage to the area to own a piece of “the marsh,” usually after a stopover of a few years in Toronto.

In the 1950s, five hundred landowners worked five- to ten-acre plots in the original polder. Second- and third-generation farmers have expanded their parents' operations in order to keep up with the consolidation of the grocery industry. They rely on larger equipment and warehouses, package their own produce, and even partner with others to farm land in warmer climates during the winter to meet their customers' demands for a year-round supply. Some store root vegetables throughout the winter in warehouses and sell to retailers until the next growing season. Today there are fewer farm families working the land but, instead of the small plots of fifty years ago, some farmers now work between one hundred and two hundred acres. The average yield of carrots and onions, the major crops, is 200 million pounds each. Hundreds of acres of snow peas, as well as other Asian

Photograph: David T. Gomez



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vegetables, are grown in the Keswick area of Holland Marsh.

Some enterprising farmers – perhaps in the spirit of making lemonade out of lemons – have even harvested pigweed, or lamb’s quarters, to sell by the bushel at the Ontario Food Terminal, serving a small ethnic market in downtown Toronto. This trend caught on, and soon plots of weeds were being seeded for market. When an Italian farmer grew what seemed to be overgrown dandelions on his farm in the late 1970s, his neighbours thought he was off his rocker. But from his efforts, the market for local arugula was born.

In the ongoing quest to corner the market with new products and to serve the ethnic markets, Holland Marsh farmers bring in new seeds, as well as heritage seeds, from around the world, get them tested for commercial production at the University of Guelph’s Muck Crops Research Station, and then let the products loose on the buyers at the food terminal. From time to time the university develops new seeds in cooperation with plant breeders. Recent innovations include wheatgrass, sunflower sprouts, purple and orange cauliflower, purple broccoli, and multicolored carrots. Woodbine Entertainment’s Executive Chef Joseph Lesch asks his suppliers specifically for Holland Marsh products, and features “Holland Marsh Greens” on his menu.

Pete and Rita Singh emigrated from Guyana to Toronto in 1972. They moved to Bradford West Gwillimbury Holland Marsh in 1978 and started farming 28 acres, which they are still farming today with the help of their four children and their families. They grow white and purple Asian bulb onions, radishes, beets, spinach, lettuce, basil, coriander, and flat leaf and curly parsley.

Pete loves the Marsh. He loves the smells of just-picked produce, the warm, spongy

soil under his feet, the banter at the food terminal, and the challenge of it all. Every morning during the summer and early fall, he rises at 3 a.m. and joins an informal convoy of Holland Marsh farmers traveling in their large refrigerated trucks down Highway 400.

Rita had been surprised to discover that farming was anything but pastoral – it was fast-paced and relentless. “Oh, my god, the weeds!” Everything grows faster on the organic, phosphorous-rich soil, including weeds. The Integrated Pest Management program, developed by the Muck Crops Research Station, allows for minimal spraying, but there is no avoiding pulling by hand if a farmer is to grow nutritious, safe vegetables.

To reach consumers directly, the Singhs’ son Shane formed a partnership with three other local businesspeople to sell vegetables directly from their own store, Buncha Farmers, in Queensville. Another Holland Marsh offspring is Frank Ferragine, better known as City TV’s Frankie Flowers. His gardening shows and columns complement his family’s Bradford Greenhouses enterprise.

The Township of Bradford West Gwillimbury, noting that their farmers are under-represented at local retail chains, has started to plan a farmers’ market as part of its downtown revitalization plan, set to open in the spring. The market’s location is near Yonge St., a popular route for Muskoka cottage-goers. This will be a market for dedicated food lovers and chefs to watch, since small- and mid-sized innovative farmers are contemplating filling their stands with new varieties of produce usually sold only to high-end Toronto gourmet shops.



Holland Marsh contains a mix of large, medium and small farms. The large ones are still family-owned and the owners, having weathered harsh business conditions for decades, have come out bigger and stronger. They're big but not so big that they've lost their conscience – the owners still live on the farms, they still farm sustainably, and they have no desire to poison us or themselves with chemicals. They are at a difficult crossroads, however, since they cannot rotate their crops without affecting their profit margins. Although these large Holland Marsh farms do supply fresh produce to the three large Ontario supermarket chains, their shelf space is shrinking because many grocers are replacing local goods with cheap, tasteless imports. And, disturbingly, while our big chain supermarkets sell us inferior goods, up to 40 percent of the produce grown in Holland Marsh gets exported.

Where does Holland Marsh go from here? Can innovations by small farms and the consolidation of larger farms stem the growing tide of imports? Foodland Ontario's Joan Fraser informs us that the agency has been developing new and more in-depth ways to promote Ontario produce since 1989, when they conducted research that determined that the effects of NAFTA were particularly brutal to our fruit and vegetable industries. Two years ago, meetings were held to devise strategies on how to escalate the promotion of Ontario products in the face of imports taking over the shelf space of major retailers. The current Pick Ontario Freshness campaign was created from these meetings.

But our federal government has not had very encouraging words about the future of our family-owned farms. Gerry Ritz, Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food, was quoted recently in a business magazine as saying that consumers should not expect "Old MacDonald type" family farms to return and to prosper. Innovations in crop technology that bring in the big dollars are usually done by big companies developing patents – not by individual farmers using seeds that belong to the public trust and contribute to biodiversity.

It may ultimately be up to consumers to pressure federal lawmakers to re-enact legislation that protects their local food supply and the land it grows on, perhaps focusing less on the GDP value of fresh produce, and instead on creating a food security and biodiversity mandate for its citizens. □

*Laura Young was born in Toronto and was raised on her grandparents' Bradford West Gwillimbury Holland Marsh farm from the age of four. As a child, she accompanied her grandfather to the Ontario Food Terminal, and remembers the chilly, dark mornings, the strong fresh smells of just-picked Marsh produce, and the excitement and chaos at the blowing of the police officer's whistle that commenced trading every morning at six o'clock. Concerned about the decreasing availability of domestic food on grocers' shelves, and inspired by writers like Professor Thomas Homer-Dixon (*The Up-**

side of Down) and Naomi Klein (*The Shock Doctrine*) and groups like the Resilience Alliance, she became a self-styled food activist who hopes to bring together various food stakeholders to create a food security mandate for Ontario citizens. She lives in Toronto with her husband and their 3-year-old son.

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