



# Toronto Food Strategy: 2015 Update

## **Reference**

Toronto Public Health. *Toronto Food Strategy: 2015 Update*. June 2015.

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# Table of Contents

Food, People, and Cities .....	2
A Vision for the Food System .....	7
Healthy Corner Stores .....	10
Mobile Good Food Project .....	13
Food Reach .....	15
Community Works .....	17
Toronto Agriculture Program .....	20
Next Steps .....	23





# FOOD, PEOPLE AND CITIES

Food plays a vital role in building healthy people and cities.



Figure 1: The Food System

Food impacts every facet of our lives. People increasingly understand that food is connected to not only to our health, but also to the environment, the economy and community. There's growing interest in cooking, gardening, food festivals, farmers' markets, specialty food stores, food entrepreneurship, volunteering with neighbourhood food projects, learning about nutrition, and supporting local farms and healthy and sustainable food.

Individuals and communities have a complex relationship with food. Food plays a powerful role in bringing people together for conversation, debate and celebration. It is the substance that can lead to the healthy development of a child. But for many of Toronto's most vulnerable populations there are systematic barriers to accessing healthy, affordable and culturally appropriate foods.

The food system is a complex set of activities and relationships including production, processing, distribution, marketing, retail, consumption and waste. Most of the food we eat comes from a highly sophisticated industrialized system.





In comparison to even 100 years ago, our food system is remarkable. Virtually any fruit, vegetable, grain, meat, fish is available on Toronto's supermarket shelves twelve months of the year. The Internet makes nutrition information easier to access than ever before.

But there are many signs that our food system is not meeting the needs of many Torontonians. Thousands of residents still cannot afford to eat a healthy diet in spite of the abundance of food available in this city.

**In 2014, TPH's Nutritious Food Basket Survey reported a 5.4% increase in the cost of food compared to 2013 results.<sup>1</sup>**



At the same time, close to half (45.8%) of adults in Toronto are overweight or obese<sup>2</sup>. While the causes of weight gain are complex, many people agree that the abundance of unhealthy

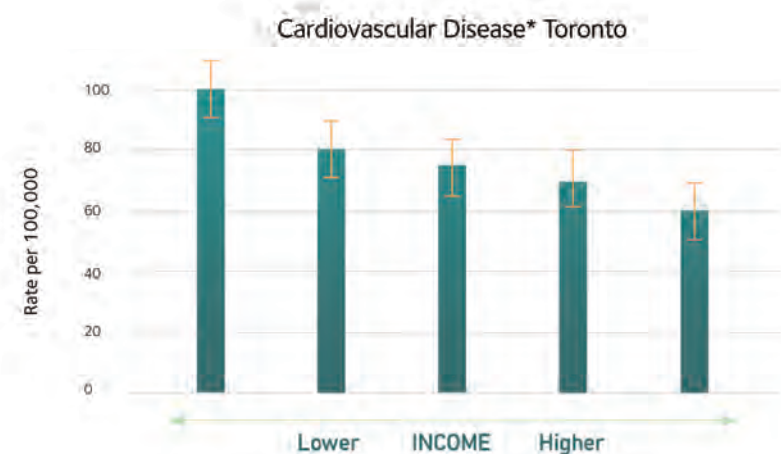


Figure 2: Incidences of cardiovascular disease by income level in Toronto<sup>6</sup>

food in fast food restaurants, convenience stores and even supermarkets, is part of the problem. Only about one in three (36.6%) adults eats vegetables<sup>2</sup> or fruits five or more times each day.

In the recent TPH student survey, less than one in seven teenagers in Toronto reported<sup>3</sup> meeting guidelines for vegetable and fruit consumption. All of these problems are felt more acutely by lower income households. For example, lower income households consume significantly less fresh produce<sup>4,5</sup> and have a higher prevalence of diet-related chronic disease<sup>6</sup>.

A major part of the food system that influences the food we eat is the food retail environment, namely, the types of stores, their geographic distribution across the city, the prices and the availability of healthy diverse food.

That is why Toronto, alongside many other major urban centres such as London, England and New York City, have developed an urban food strategy to realize the potential of food to build a great city.

<sup>1</sup> Toronto Public Health (2014). Cost of Nutritious Food Basket–Toronto 2014. Staff report to the Board of Health. October 31<sup>st</sup>, 2014. Snapshots:

<sup>2</sup> Public Health Ontario. Snapshots: Toronto, ON: Ontario Agency for Health Protection and Promotion.

<sup>3</sup> Cancer Care Ontario. News and information on nutrition and cancer prevention, Volume 2 Supplement 2: Ontario's food security and cancer prevention. 2005

<sup>4</sup> Cancer Care Ontario. News and information on nutrition and cancer prevention supplement 1: Vegetable and fruit intake. 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Toronto Public Health. Healthy Futures: 2014 Toronto Public Health Student Survey. March, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Toronto Public Health (2008). The Unequal City: Income and Health Inequalities in Toronto.



## Mapping Healthy Food Access

Income is a critical factor in eating a healthy diet, but the food environment in which the income is spent on food choices also plays an important role. In order to better understand the food environment, TPH mapped the food retail establishments in Toronto. This mapping of the food environment helps to direct the initiatives of the Food Strategy. The maps are continually updated with current data to inform future directions. The “food environment”<sup>7</sup> refers to:

- what food stores or restaurants are closest
- availability of healthy foods sold at nearby stores
- how affordable is the food that’s available
- quality and freshness of the food
- variety of foods available to meet cultural preferences.

Toronto’s food environment has several features. Toronto has an abundance of supermarkets, pockets of

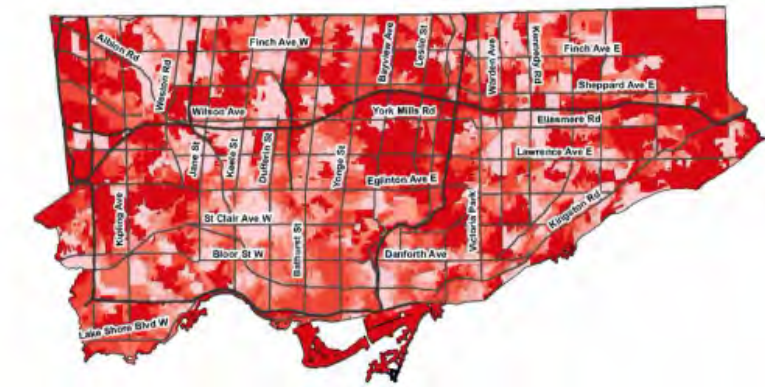


Figure 3: Modified Food Retail Environment Index for Toronto. The darkest red areas are those where the food environment is dominated by less healthy food sources (typically convenience stores or fast food outlets). The median index ratio for the city was 0.195. In the lowest quintile census tracts (the 20% of areas with the lowest score), the ratio was approximately 15 to 1 in favour of less healthy food stores.<sup>8</sup>

food deserts and an overabundance of stores selling less healthy food.

Food deserts are traditionally defined as lower income areas with relatively few nearby supermarkets. Although there is an abundance of supermarkets in Toronto there are almost 31,000 households in the city’s lowest income areas that are more than 1km walking distance to a supermarket. A little more than 9,000 of those households are 1km

or more from any kind of food outlet<sup>9</sup>.

Across Toronto there is also an overabundance of less healthy food options. According to an analysis of the modified food retail environment index (MFREI) which calculates the ratio of healthier to less healthy food store locations within a 1km walking distance from each city block on average there are four less healthy food stores for every healthier food retail outlet (Figure 3).

<sup>7</sup> Minaker L. (2012). Measuring the Food Environment in Canada. Health Canada.

<sup>8</sup> Distance was calculated based on a 1km road network walking radius from block centroids. Income was calculated at the census tract using the low income measure (2009). Toronto Public Health’s Toronto Healthy Environments Inspection System (THEIS) provided the locations of food retail establishments (2014). Total dwellings ↑1km to supermarket = 30,956; total dwellings ↑1km to any food retail = 9284 the census tract using the low income measure (2009). Toronto Public Health’s Toronto Healthy Environments Inspection System (THEIS) provided the locations of food retail establishments (2014).

<sup>9</sup> Total dwellings ↑1km to supermarket = 30,956; total dwellings ↑1km to any food retail = 9284



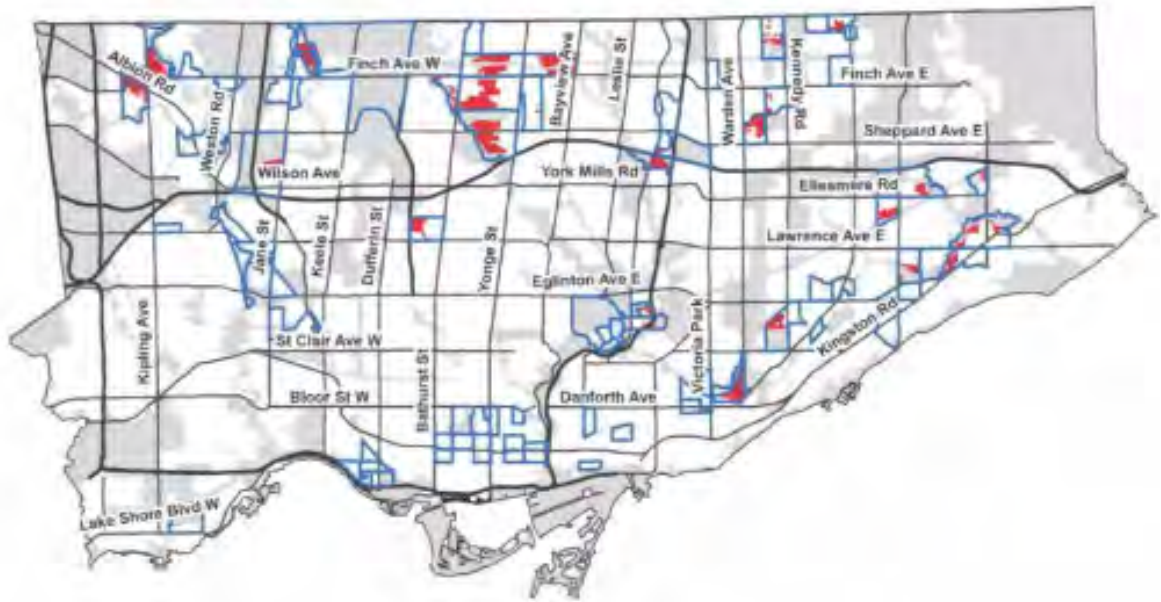


Figure 4: Lowest Quintile MRFEI Scores and Lowest Quintile Neighbourhood Income

Healthier food retail was defined as a supermarket, butcher shop, fish shop, bakery (some), or any smaller food store that sells a significant quantity of fresh produce. By this definition, about one third of all food stores in Toronto are considered healthier food retail.

are a high number of lower income households and the food environment within which they choose to spend their limited resources near home is dominated by stores that sell unhealthy food.

An analysis of the map revealed that there are no obvious patterns in the concentration of different types of food stores. There was also no significant correlation between neighbourhood income and index score. However, as seen in Figure 4, there are several areas of Toronto where low income and a low MFREI score overlap. In these areas, there

## VISION: TO ENABLE A HEALTHIER, MORE SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEM.

The vision of the Toronto Food Strategy is to create a healthy and sustainable food system that meets the needs of all Toronto residents. To achieve that vision, a small team within Toronto Public Health was established to engage with partners across the City to create the system change required. The Food Strategy builds on the City's long history of leadership in this area, beginning with the establishment of the Toronto Food Policy Council (TFPC) in 1990. The TFPC serves as the Community Reference Group for the Food Strategy. The Food Strategy is grounded and informed by the broad food related activities of TPH.

Toronto Public Health and its partners use a system lens to see the bigger picture of a healthy sustainable food system by developing solutions to food problems and by leveraging their connections to other health, social, economic and environmental initiatives.



Toronto Public Health works to address many of the system elements through project incubation, pilot initiatives, research, program delivery and policy change.

A feature of complex systems is that measures of success are always changing. For this reason, it is important for TPH to reassess the priorities of the Food Strategy and how they link with ongoing TPH food and nutrition work, at regular intervals.

In early 2015, TPH conducted a portfolio analysis of TPH's food initiatives. The food portfolio analysis was intended to recognize the wide range of food-related activities in Toronto Public Health, to reflect on the broader food environment and to learn new ways to effectively invest in the programs and strategies that address a growing and critical need. The objective was to identify opportunities for greater connections and new collaborative initiatives.



Through this process TPH identified six underlying themes to promote healthy food systems change within the organization:

- 1. Healthy Food Access**
- 2. Community Building and Inclusion**
- 3. Food Literacy**
- 4. Community Economic Development**
- 5. Infrastructure/Supply Chain**
- 6. Improving the Food Environment**

These themes represent an evolution of the Food Strategy's 2010 Cultivating Food Connections' priority areas of action (Support Food Friendly Neighbourhoods; Make Food a Centerpiece of Toronto's New Green Economy; Eliminate Hunger in Toronto; Connect City and Countryside through Food; Empower Residents with Food Skills and Information and Urge Federal and Provincial Governments to Establish Health-focused Food Policies).

The services provided by TPH and its partners address many elements of the food system and reflect the underlying themes of the food portfolio analysis. Specifically, the Food Strategy focuses on building on the momentum of local and city activities to find and implement innovative ways of achieving multiple objectives through food. The Food Strategy takes an "action research" approach to incubate and prototype creative projects to initiate and scale food system change. These initiatives reflect the underlying themes and are funded through leveraging resources from partner agencies and other levels of government. Multiple collaborative partnerships enable broader reach and scalable impact.



Current initiatives include:



#### **Healthy Corner Stores**

Helping independent small food retailers in lower-income neighbourhoods sell healthier foods in profitable ways.



#### **Mobile Good Food Market project**

The Mobile Good Food Market operated by FoodShare sells fresh, affordable vegetables and fruit in lower income areas that are underserved by traditional food retail.



#### **Food Reach**

One stop healthy food ordering for community agencies and school through an e-commerce platform providing wholesale pricing through aggregated purchasing.



#### **Community Food Works**

Integrated training for low income residents that combines food handler training and certification, food literacy, nutrition education and employment skills training.



#### **Toronto Agriculture Program**

Supporting the expansion of urban food growing.

The above portfolio of initiatives seek to affect change through a systems approach that promotes community engagement, partnership development and policy change.

Each initiative responds to a particular mix of food system elements (nutrition, disease prevention, social justice, food literacy, environmental protection, economic development, etc.). These elements are deeply inter-connected and complex, and as such activities within one initiative may affect all others.

Most initiatives are conducted in partnership with other groups, including other government agencies, the non-profit/charitable organizations, academic institutions and for-profit entities.

Each initiative impacts Toronto's economic and political systems in different ways. For instance, some may focus on policy development (and therefore impact City Council or other city divisions), while others may focus on the delivery of a new product or service (and therefore impact the non-profit and private sectors).

# HEALTHY CORNER STORES

Helping independent small food retailers in lower-income neighbourhoods sell healthier foods in profitable ways.

Toronto is home to almost 2000 convenience stores. Most of them follow a traditional model of selling cigarettes, lottery tickets, drinks and snacks. Research shows that people who live closer to a convenience store report a less healthy diet and increased body mass. In Waterloo, ON a study found that females of average height (5'5) weighed 15.2lbs less for every km increase in distance from their home to nearest convenience store.<sup>10</sup>



Fresh produce for sale at Scarborough Healthy Corner Store pilot site

These smaller stores play a big role in people's impulse purchasing behaviours. But the convenience store world is changing. Profit margins on cigarettes are shrinking, soda sales are decreasing and Ontario Lottery tickets are now available online.

Interviews with convenience store owners across the city found that many are ready for a change. They're looking for new ways to make money and new ways to connect with the local community.

In 2014, with funding from the Public Health Agency of Canada, the Food Strategy

launched a research project to evaluate a healthy corner store initiative. The project is a partnership among pilot convenience store owners, City staff, landlords, community agencies, retail experts and academic advisors.

In spring 2014, the first healthy corner store conversion launched in a small store in Scarborough. Through the pilot project, the team has worked with the storeowners and other partners to address the many challenges facing storeowners who want to sell healthier food. This included produce

distributors, connecting them with fresh in-store promotional materials, handling and display, retail consultant support, tracking and analyzing sales data and, most importantly, strengthening connections with local residents. Household surveys were conducted with local residents before the project started. The research will follow up with the same people in 2015 to assess whether the healthy corner store initiative influenced their diet, shopping habits or other behaviours. Final results will be available summer 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Minaker, L. (2013). Evaluating food environment assessment methodologies: a multilevel examination of associations between food environments and individual outcomes. University of Alberta, PhD Thesis.

## Keys to a Successful Healthy Corner Store Project



### Storeowners with a Great Attitude

Ultimately, storeowners themselves are the change agents. Making changes brings risk and they need to have patience, commitment and a desire to serve the community.



### Distribution

Worked with a local distributor to deliver fresh produce to the store owner at affordable prices. Future plans include linking store operators to the online food procurement portal to enable access to wholesale pricing and delivery.



### Marketing

Worked with a marketing firm to create the “Grab some Good” brand to draw customers to the healthier offerings within the store.



### Community connections

Worked with community organizations and the landlord (East Scarborough Storefront, Seed to Table and CAPREIT) to run community events to introduce the community to the changes at the store and to get their ongoing feedback on changes within the store.



### Safe handling and storage of fresh produce

Developed a store owner resource to support them in stocking and handling fresh produce based on Toronto Public Health nutrition and food handling resources.



### Physical changes

Worked with store owners and the landlord (CAPREIT) to invest in converting their stores to include point of sale system to track sales, fridges to stock fresh produce and leasehold improvements such as flooring and lighting.

The project has expanded to a second store in East York.

Shifting convenience stores towards a healthier corner store can change a neighbourhood's food environment. The residents in the community and the store owner will both benefit. Scaling up across the City will also require improvement of the distribution system currently available to independent retailers to include affordable healthy products.





GRAB  
SOME  
GOOD



# THE MOBILE GOOD FOOD MARKET PROJECT WITH FOODSHARE TORONTO

Mobile market selling fresh, affordable fruits and vegetables through a retrofitted wheel-trans vehicle in lower income areas that are underserved by traditional food retail

In 2012, FoodShare Toronto, TPH, United Way Toronto, and the Food Policy Research Initiative launched the Mobile Good Food Market (MGFM) pilot to sell affordable, fresh fruits and vegetables at multiple sites across Toronto in neighbourhoods that are underserved by traditional food retail.

Toronto's food retail environment is a large mix of establishments across the City. However there are several low income communities in Toronto that do not have access to supermarkets within 1 km walking distance.

For many of these neighbourhoods sufficient space is not available to build new supermarkets. As a result new retail models are needed to address the gap in food access for these communities.

The Mobile Market is a retrofitted TTC WheelTrans vehicle that is source of healthy, affordable food, and is a community meeting place where neighbours come together, and children often come to shop with their parents.

On March 11, 2015 City Council approved base operations funding for Toronto Public Health to expand the Mobile Good Food Market with a second vehicle. This funding is an important step in sustaining and expanding the reach of the project and thus expanding access to high quality, fresh produce across the city.

In addition, TPH and TTC are exploring future partnership opportunities to provide healthy food access through the transit system. Transit systems from many other big cities worldwide have integrated fresh food kiosks, including Philadelphia, London, New York and Montreal. Other jurisdictions like Atlanta are also initiating projects as transit authorities embrace sustainability and active city principles.





# FOOD REACH

One stop healthy food ordering for community agencies and schools.

Community food sector organizations provide millions of meals to some of Toronto's most vulnerable residents. From 2008 to 2014 visits to Toronto's Food banks in Toronto's inner<sup>11</sup> suburbs rose by 38%.

The community food sector organizations include transitional and supportive housing, shelters, food banks, dropins, community health centres, multiservice agencies and Student Nutrition Toronto programs.



**The community food sector organizations spend approximately \$30 million annually on food (not including labour or other costs of delivering food programs).**



**In addition, Student Nutrition Toronto spends about \$17 million on food alone<sup>12</sup>.**

Currently, the primary source of food purchased by the community food sector is imported products from chain grocery stores. Currently it is the only option available. It requires considerable staff or volunteer hours and transportation expenses and the food prices are not competitive. Agencies frequently have to compromise on nutritional quality and/or quantity of food served.

The Food Reach collaborative project was initiated to develop an e-commerce platform that would aggregate purchasing power of the community services sector. The initiative is a partnership of Toronto Public Health, PARC (Parkdale Activity Recreation Centre), Fresh Tech Food Processing, the Ontario Food Terminal, and Student Nutrition Toronto. The Ontario Local Food Fund and the Public Health Agency of Canada funded the first phase of the project. Metcalf Foundation funded an agency engagement

manager position to support implementation of the project.

The e-commerce platform launches in spring 2015 with "early adopter" agencies to pilot the project.

The initiative helps address food insecurity in the community by increasing nutritional quality and decreasing costs.

By amalgamating the real time purchases of several agencies through an online ordering portal, the system will enable larger bulk purchasing, resulting in significant cost reductions based on volume purchases and reduced procurement time. Additionally, it could save agencies staff time by coordinating purchases and thereby avoiding shopping on an adhoc basis at local stores. The platform will also support purchases from Healthy Corner Store owners.

<sup>11</sup> Daily Bread Food Bank (2014). Hunger Snapshot: 2014 Profile of Hunger in the GTA.

<sup>12</sup> Miller, S. (2013). Finding Food: Community Food Procurement in the City of Toronto. Report for Toronto Public Health.



Image of Toronto Food Terminal

Through Food Reach, food will be directly delivered to agencies and student nutrition programs and by aggregating purchasing, costs will be reduced. The portal will provide community agencies and student nutrition programs with direct access to fresh, affordable and diverse foods for their clients.

Food Reach can also have broader impacts on the supply chain. It will create a new pathway for purchasing healthy food at affordable prices for convenience store owners who wish to sell healthier foods and can provide a

new channel for local farmers. The e-commerce platform has been designed for multiple consolidators over time.

Fresh Tech will be the only consolidator for the first year in the pilot phase. Others are expected to come on board once the system is fully operational. The platform will also enable rigorous metrics to be identified and collected in order to inform ongoing evaluation and reporting on measures of success.

# COMMUNITY FOOD WORKS

Integrated training for low income residents that combines food handler training and certification, food literacy, nutrition education and employment skills

The Community Food Works initiative was initiated by Toronto Food Strategy as a pilot project in 2011, to address barriers to accessing food handler training among low income communities. It is an innovative/integrative approach to public health service delivery that links food handler training and certification, food skills, and employment support through a learner centred adult education approach.



The initiative is delivered through partnerships with community agencies and other City divisions. Community Food Works supports low income residents who are job ready to access employment in the food sector. Toronto Public Health's Food Handler Training and certification operates on a cost recovery basis resulting in a cost of \$94.23 per person to complete the course. This creates a barrier for many low income residents. Community Food Works provides the training at no cost to participants.

Community Food Works highlights ways in which public health can integrate food skills and food safety training while addressing employment as one of the broader social determinants of health. This is achieved by brokering relationships and resources across government and community while applying an adult education approach. The curriculum is designed to be adapted by local instructors and community agencies to meet specific community needs.

Community Food Works also enables access to training for low income residents who want to start their own businesses to earn supplementary income. Its delivery in a community kitchen environment provides participants with a practical understanding of food safety as well as healthy eating by facilitating healthy cooking skills that integrates theory and practice.

Community Food Works also serves to improve social cohesion and reduce social isolation by breaking down barriers between people in the neighbourhoods.





Participants preparing food at Community Food Works

405

In 2013-14, 405 participants were enrolled in the program. 88% obtained their food handler certification.

100%

All participants reported increased knowledge of food safety and nutrition.

49%

49% of participants that passed the exam found some kind of employment: 76 in the food sector, 58 were self-employed (e.g. catering), and 43 worked in other places.

As the initiative continues to be embraced by communities across Toronto, Community Food Works will:

- Collaborate and support agencies who want to apply this integrated program model in their neighbourhoods.
- Seek additional partnerships and external resources to support implementation of this integrated approach across the city.
- Continue to support low income communities to have the confidence and skills to access healthy foods by supplementing their household income through employment and skills development.
- Empower community residents and act as a catalyst in food related business incubation and entrepreneurship opportunities.
- Promote access to available community kitchen space by partnering with others to create an inventory of available kitchens while providing guidance and support to agencies who wish to improve and/or upgrade their kitchens.







# TORONTO AGRICULTURE PROGRAM

Supporting the expansion of  
urban food growing

The Food Strategy and Toronto Food Policy Council (TFPC), in partnership with other City divisions and the Toronto Food Policy Council and community groups created the Toronto Agriculture Program to expand opportunities to grow food in the city.

Urban agriculture is an effective mechanism to engage diverse communities and build strong neighbourhoods while increasing access to healthy local food. Urban agriculture activities also contribute to social and environmental outcomes. There are multiple community benefits such as increased engagement, employment or income supplementation, sustainability, volunteerism, capacity building, community safety and learning opportunities. Urban agriculture promotes food literacy, the consumption of fruit and vegetables and physical activity.

In 2012, City Council adopted GrowTO: An Urban Agriculture Action Plan for Toronto. GrowTO was the result of over three years of collaborative work by numerous community and institutional stakeholders with participation from various City Divisions and Agencies. The recommendations identified six priorities for scaling up urban agriculture in the city of Toronto:

1. Link Growers to Land and Space
2. Strengthen Education and Training
3. Increase Visibility and Promotion
4. Add Value to Urban Gardens
5. Cultivate Partnerships
6. Develop Supportive Policies



In order to implement the GrowTO Action Plan Toronto City Council created the Toronto Agricultural Program (TAP) in November, 2013. Through a partnership with the Toronto Urban Growers, several grants have been received to support the implementation of the Action Plan TAP identifies three key activities moving forward.

1. Supporting promotion of agricultural activities;
2. Facilitating access to land for agriculture; and
3. Identifying and addressing policy barriers to the expansion of agriculture in Toronto.

TAP is supported by TPH and the TFPC.

In 2013, the Black Creek Community Farm (BCCF) was created on a seven acre site near Jane Street and Steeles Avenue in Toronto. BCCF is a collaborative partnership between Everdale, AfriCan Food Basket, Food Share, Fresh City Farms and the Toronto Regional Conservation Authority. TPH and the TFPC have supported multiple initiatives at the farm.

A research collaboration, Healthier Harvest Research Consortium (HHRC), was developed to explore, enhance and communicate the health impacts of growing food at all scales in Toronto. This collaboration includes researchers from Toronto Public Health (TPH), University of Toronto (U of T), Ryerson and York Universities and members of the BCCF Steering Committee.

TPH, in partnership with the research consortium, is conducting a Health Impact Assessment (HIA) to assess and measure the impact of the farm, and understand how to mitigate any adverse impacts. The overall goal is to conduct applied research that informs the development of healthy public policy to support urban agriculture across the city.





Image of Urban grower in Toronto

The HIA will expand understanding of the role of urban agriculture and its impact on health (physical, social, economic, ecological). The HIA will also contribute to the development of key indicators that communities can use to measure and communicate the impact of their urban agriculture activities.

The Food Strategy and TFPC also work with the Toronto Urban Growers and Vineland Research and Innovation Centre to expand the production of diverse crops that meet the cultural preferences of Toronto's diverse communities. The World Crops project supports local farmers to grow these crops and find markets in Toronto with a focus on improving access to these foods in lower income neighbourhoods. The collaborative initiative is supported by the McConnell Foundation and seeks to:

- increase production of locally grown world crops (import substitution) while creating and reaching diverse markets in the city;
- develop appropriately scaled market linkages between urban and rural farmers and urban communities; and
- expand the number of small scale retailers selling locally grown world crops within a range of communities.

TPH and the TFPC are also working to facilitate access to Hydro Corridor land for new community farms. These activities all integrate into the Toronto Agriculture Program, representing Toronto Public Health's contribution to this exciting city-wide initiative.

# NEXT STEPS

The need for action to improve the food system is clear. Toronto faces a range of health, social and environmental problems related to food. The Food Strategy promotes approaching the problem through a food system lens – seeing the connections in the City’s work and implementing food activities that will help Toronto meet its objectives, while also building a healthier Toronto.

As the Food Strategy continues to evolve, TPH will build on current partnerships and explore future collaborations across City divisions and with City wide initiatives including:

- The Poverty Reduction Strategy
- Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy
- The new Residential Apartment Commercial (RAC) Zone

The Food Strategy will also look for opportunities to scale its initiatives and integrate with ongoing projects within TPH and with community organizations across the city.





Possibility grows here.

I ♥ LOCAL

PICKED FRESH  
TODAY!

