

World crops

Rising food prices and food security validate Greenbelt farmers' efforts to grow new crops that suit everyone's tastes

The food network

When Deepak Chadha opened Signature Indian Cuisine in Whitby three years ago, he used imported ingredients for his dishes. Not anymore. Now locally grown new crops geared to the ethnic market are readily available to the 33-year-old chef, such as curry leaves—a vital flavourful component in South Asian cooking—along with okra, eggplant, lentils and cilantro.

"I definitely buy local, and often the price is lower," says Chadha, who also grows his own herbs for use at his 40-seat restaurant which specializes in Punjabi dishes. He notes too that local produce is fresher and has more natural flavour because, unlike imports, there is often no need for preservatives and refrigeration during transport.

Growing local crops that used to be considered non-traditional, (also known as world crops), is a response to the increased demand from the GTA's ethnically diverse

establishes. But many in the agricultural research industry agree that more crops can be grown locally. To learn what Ontario farmers can grow best, the Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation has been providing funding for experimental crops at the Vineland Research and Innovation Centre, a non-profit organization dedicated to sustainable horticulture. Situated in the town of Lincoln, in the Niagara Region, Vineland sits on 218 acres protected by Ontario Greenbelt legislation.

Ahmed Bilal, Vineland's research associate in crop production and diversification, currently oversees a project of raised beds with drip irrigation and black plastic mulch. "Southern Ontario has one of the most diversified populations in the world," says Bilal. "About 47 per cent of the people in the GTA are foreign-born, and the market for food is changing as a result." In his research, Bilal has found

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population. Nevertheless, in 2010, Ontario imported more than \$5 billion in fruit and vegetable products but exported only about half that—\$2.3 billion—according to Statistics Canada. And the Canadian Produce Marketing Association cites that in Canada, we import 80 per cent of our fresh fruits and veg-

that *kaddu* (Indian pumpkin) and red Chinese hot peppers grow well in Niagara's local micro-climate. The centre has also had success with okra, eggplant and yardlong beans.

Consumers in the GTA spent \$297 million last year on "conventional" vegetables, notes Jim Brandle, CEO of Vineland. Now,



Deepak Chadha takes advantage of the growing season to source local farms for produce for his Whitby restaurant.

with the centre's success in new crops, there are more choices for everyone. "We are the arctic of the tropics," declares Brandle. "And there are tens of varieties of each crop, with some better adapted to our conditions."

As well, Vineland has been researching a range of issues regarding new crops. What do GTA shoppers want? How many acres should be allotted for these crops? How will the harvests be delivered? How does the environmental cost stack up against the shipping of imported varieties? Already, says Brandle, some of the GTA's major grocery chains have expressed interest in the results of Vineland's research work.

Zeroing in on cost savings for consumers at the grocery checkout, Brandle says that imported red carrots, for example, currently sell for about \$4.99 a pound, but Ontario farmers can, in fact, produce these carrots to sell profitably for less than \$1 a pound.

In a real-life demonstration of field to fork, the yield from Vineland's experimental crops last year was turned over to The Stop Community Food Centre, a Toronto-based non-profit organization.

The Stop, which started in the 1970s as a food bank, promotes access to healthy, locally produced food through community development. This expanded mandate has led The Stop to tackle other issues, such as poverty and marginalized groups, including immigrants. And to enhance the premise that healthy food and good nutrition should be available to everyone, the organization has developed community services along with plans to open centres next year in Perth and Stratford.

Essential to the symbiotic relationship between grower and consumer, the choice of crops to grow must be geared to what consumers want, and growers need assured markets, says Nick Saul, executive director of The

Stop. And this scenario should not be restricted to grocery stores and their consumers.

"It would make such a difference to local growers if, say, hospitals, whose food is paid for with tax dollars, could commit to buying a portion of their produce locally instead of importing," notes Saul. "That would mean an immediate economic future for the farmer."

The Greenbelt Foundation at greenbelt.ca has multiple-language booklets on world foods, with directions to both markets and farms, where you can pick your own produce. Find out more about sustainable world crops at greenbelt.ca, vinelandresearch.com and thestop.org

This sponsored feature is the fourth in a six-part series. Look for the next one on Wednesday, May 25, 2011.

World leaders

Green minds think alike

What we learned from the first Global Greenbelts Conference

"Ontario has got it right." This is one of the many hopeful conclusions reached by 210 international delegates from 16 land-use-protected regions, when they gathered in Toronto recently for the first Global Greenbelts Conference. Hosted by Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation—the Toronto-based champion for Ontario's development-protected lands within the Golden Horseshoe Area—the event spawned the Global Greenbelts Network and a unanimous call to preserve and expand the boundaries of green lands.

"It really gave everyone the sense that we're all in this together," says Burkhard Mausberg, president of the Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation. "We're fighting the same fight."

The Foundation shared three noteworthy findings regarding the state of greenbelt regions around the world.

1. Ontario has got it right.

Delegates unanimously endorsed the 1.8-million-acre Greenbelt model that envelops the Golden Horseshoe Area and, through the Ontario Greenbelt Act, enjoys the best legislative protection in the world. The creation of an environmental foundation is globally respected and valued as it effects public support and awareness, and is key to ensuring the Greenbelt's sustainability through changing governments. According to a recent Environics poll, nine out of 10 Ontarians support the Ontario

Greenbelt. "Ontario is on the right path," sums up Mausberg, "and we're seen as a model for the rest of the world."

2. Greenbelts are the foundation for more livable and sustainable cities. For the first

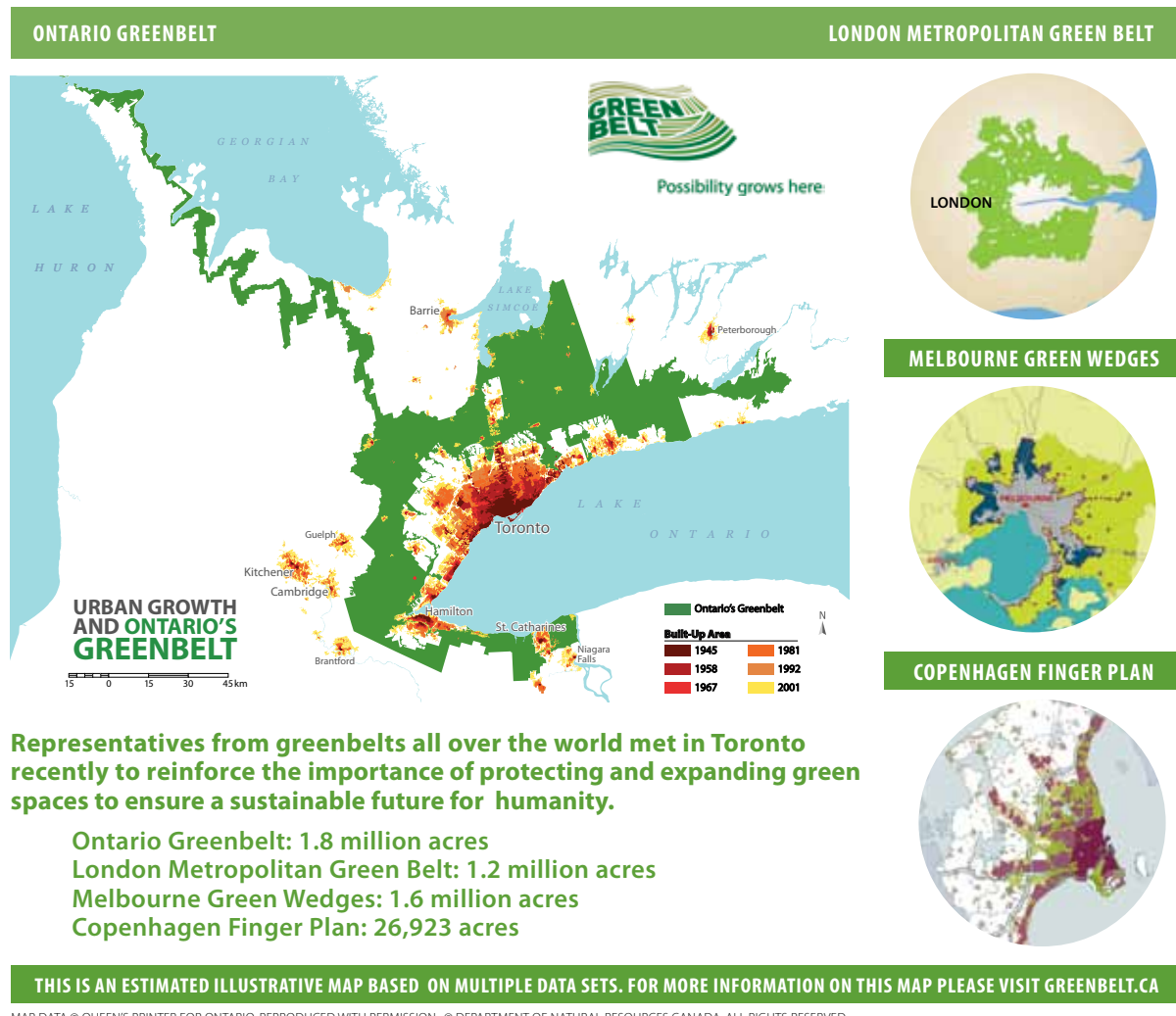
time in human history, there are more people living in urban, rather than rural, areas, thus demanding smarter sustainable planning. More green spaces will enhance food security, as well as offset the negative effects of hyper-urbanization that has given rise to the megacity

or city-states in the U.S., China and India. In the urban "heat islands" of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, for example, where there are few green areas, the temperature can rise by as much as 10 degrees Celsius higher than in the outskirts of the city—a life-threatening scenario during

a heat wave. As well, smog from commuter traffic has so disrupted local weather patterns that it rains almost exclusively between Monday and Friday. These heat islands also affect the climate in other densely populated cities such as Chicago, Beijing and Berlin. "Climate change is just going to get worse," warns Michael Buxton, a greenbelt researcher from Melbourne.

3. The Global Greenbelts Network is committed to expanding and protecting greenbelts, biospheres and other protected lands worldwide. Among these regions are the ambitious pan-European greenbelt initiative, Australia's "green wedges" (linear green spaces running through urban areas) and the Green Belt Biosphere Reserve in São Paulo, Brazil. In serving rural and urban dwellers alike, the network will also promote the economic viability of small rural communities in protected areas, encourage local food movements, as well as support local farms and municipal councils. Describing the Greenbelt as one of the most important movements in the 21st century, author and environmentalist Margaret Atwood said in her keynote speech: "It's not Nature this movement aims to save—it's us."

"It's a movement to save the human race through preserving and improving the conditions that we ourselves need in order to remain alive."



Ontario's Greenbelt has saved taxpayers over \$15 billion

Providing ecological goods and services, such as water filtration and flood management

GREEN BELT Possibility grows here