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Spring is an exciting, if nervous, time of year for fruit farmers

By Luke Edwards

Even though he spent late April nervous that a spring frost could kill off many of the blossoms that would otherwise develop into the delicious fruit his family has farmed and sold for 40 years, Dan DeVries had to admit he loves spring.

“Spring is the best time of year,” he said. “Seeing the potential for a new crop.”

A life on the farm and in the orchards hasn’t dulled the wonder DeVries feels when he sees the peach, plum and other fruit trees come back to life, with tiny buds that signal future fruit.

“Creation is an amazing thing,” he said.

Spring 2024 reminds DeVries a lot of 2012. Speaking in one of his family’s orchards in Fenwick just as a frost warning enveloped the Niagara region, DeVries said the trees were a couple weeks ahead of normal. Back in 2012, a late cold stretch following a similar ahead-of-schedule spring spelled doom for much of the fruit, killing it before it even really started.

The hope in 2024 is that technology like the DeVries’ nine frost fans and applications of zinc and a seaweed extract thought to protect trees will be enough to make the difference. Fortunately, where 2012 saw a dry winter and spring, there’s enough moisture this year to give tender fruit growers like DeVries some optimism.

“We mitigate risk as much as possible, and leave the rest up to God,” he said.

If the orchards make it through the late frost risks of late April and early May relatively unscathed, though, it could set up a good year for fruit crops in Niagara, with tight clusters and other signs pointing up.

Tree fruit might be a ways away, but DeVries said customers to their Canboro Road market can expect to find local asparagus soon, with the DeVries’ own strawberries not too far behind.

While they’ve always sold fruit on the farm the market in its current form is a relatively new addition. But it has quickly grown to become a major source of revenue. The wholesaling part of the farm may still be the biggest revenue generator, but DeVries said it’s pretty close to being a one third split between the wholesaling, their own market and the various markets and roadside stands where DeVries fruit can be found.

It’s a far cry from when his father, Leo, decided to chase a long held passion and started the farm after working as a carpenter most of his life. DeVries said he doubts his parents or anyone in the family could have predicted what would become of the farm.

They began expanding in the early 2000s, and the on-farm market can trace its roots to the COVID-19 pandemic.

“We were able to be there for our community and provide food,” DeVries said.

The market now sells all the basic staples a family would need for their weekly grocery shop. It’s also allowed them to host events like the upcoming Mother’s Day Market, which runs 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.

“It’s always been a real hit,” DeVries said.

A devout family, DeVries said they’ve always wanted to support the community. They’ve-



Heading into May, the blossoms were out on many trees at DeVries Fruit Farm in Fenwick. ~ Luke Edwards photo

held fundraisers for various organizations and individuals.

And DeVries said he hopes that community mindedness will go both ways, not just for his family’s farm, but for all the families and farmers who grow the food we eat. That’s because late frosts and wonky weather is only one of the potential sources of trouble for farmers.

Rising input costs and the seemingly relentless pressure of development can also keep farmers like DeVries awake at night. DeVries said Niagara is special because of what it can grow, and he wants to see it kept that way.

Drive down just about any rural road in the region, he said, and you are likely to come across a farm, roadside stand, or both.

“We need community support to keep that happening,” he said.

All those big picture things could keep a person busy full time. But for farmers like DeVries, there’s still the day-to-day work to do on the farm. Heading into May, he said they had a good handle on pruning, and the coming days and weeks would see them finish that work off and also keep an eye on spraying needs. A new Intelligent Spray Application sprayer DeVries bought a couple years ago uses the latest technology to apply spray in a hyper focused and precise way - to both save money and be more environmentally conscious. It’s another investment that DeVries hopes to pay for itself in three to five years with reduced spray costs.

From there it’ll be keeping an eye on the weather. The rest of spring and early summer doesn’t need to be particularly warm, DeVries said, but sunny skies helps things along and timely rains will be welcomed.

First crop estimates expected in June

With spring often bringing uncertain weather, Ontario Tender Fruit manager Sarah Marshall said crop estimates don’t typically happen until early June.

“We are currently a bit earlier than last year, based on bloom in certain crops in certain areas, but not all areas of Niagara are in full bloom yet,” she said in an April 23 email.

“Until we get through whatever is going to happen in May into early June (if colder than last year, could influence timing) we really won’t know for sure.” 🌿

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Private member's bill would give agritourism operators added protection

By Luke Edwards

A private member's bill that will go through second reading this month could help Ontario farmers who wish to add an agritourism component to their business.

Matthew Rae, MPP for Perth Wellington, tabled the Growing Agritourism Act last month. His goal with the private member's bill is to provide consistency and protection for farmers around liability. Rae said this type of legislation is fairly common south of the border, but would be a first of its kind in Canada.

"It will help remove some barriers to those investments that farm operators can make in their agritourism operations," he said.

Though not to the level of Niagara, Rae said in his home riding of Perth Wellington, agritourism has been growing in recent years. Seeing a significant potential added revenue stream for farm operators across the province, Rae said he's hopeful the bill will help Ontario's ag sector reach that potential.

"For me it's a great experience to be able to support our small businesses and agribusinesses," he said.

With the bill, Rae said operators would have to clearly inform visitors of the inherent risks associated with farm operations in order to benefit from the liability protections it offers.

"Not many people have a direct connection to a farm anymore in Ontario but many people want to visit and experience that," he said.

"But they need to obviously be aware that ground is uneven, for example, on an operating farm."

Rae first became aware of the issue while talking with officials from Farm Fresh Ontario, which supported the tabling of the bill.

"This act will give peace of mind to farm operators across Ontario, allowing us to continue to welcome visitors to our homes and farms, sharing our passion for agriculture through fun and educational experiences," said chair Darlene Downey.

Other agencies, including the Tourism Industry Association of Ontario and the Ontario Federation of Agriculture, lent support as well.

"Ontario farmers are innovating through agritourism opportunities and connecting with Ontarians by selling exceptional local products, educating consumers on where their food comes from, and growing our provincial economy through new revenue streams. The Growing Agritourism Act 2024 will reduce red tape and help agritourism operators grow and diversify their operations across Ontario," said OFA president Drew Spoelstra.

A 2022 survey by the OFA found more than 40 per cent of respondents said they would sell value-added products or offer on-farm experiences.

During a presentation at the February Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Growers Conference, Penn State assistant professor of marketing and local/regional food systems Claudia Sch-



Perth Wellington MPP Matthew Rae tabled a private member's bill that aims to provide more consistent liability protection for farmers looking to start a agritourism venture. ~ Matthew Rae photo

midt outlined the potential of agritourism as an added revenue stream for farm operators in Ontario, but did point out liability concerns as a potential issue.

The bill is set to go for second reading on May 7, and assuming it's approved, will then go for committee review.



AWARDS NIGHT 2024

Ann Marie Chechalk: A writer and wrangler of goats and kids *Longtime farm journalist, 4-H leader receives lifetime achievement award*

By Luke Edwards

It may seem unimaginable now, but Ann Marie Chechalk quite literally didn't know what she was getting into when she started volunteering with the local 4-H club.

As Rob Cosby outlined the many achievements that made Chechalk worthy of the Niagara Federation of Agriculture's 2024 lifetime achievement award, he harkened back to her early days in agriculture. After receiving Butter Pecan, her first goat, as a Christmas present one year Chechalk was later asked if she'd be interested in helping out with 4-H.

"She said 'sure', then asked, 'What's 4-H?'" Cosby told the audience at the April 13 ceremony.

That kickstarted a 40-year connection with the club that continues to this day. While she may be best known for her involvement with the goat clubs of 4-H, Chechalk would eventually branch out into many other areas, and for decades has been a stalwart supporter of the club.

"She spearheaded numerous fundraising campaigns over the years," said Cosby.

With her husband Mike, the couple are the caretakers of the

popular 4-H food booth, which has raised more than \$100,000 over 20 years. That money has helped 4-H kids learn to do by doing, the 4-H motto.

But it wasn't just 4-H that made Chechalk a worthy recipient.

"Ann Marie's probably best known for goats, 4-H, and Niagara Farmers' Monthly," said Cosby.

That first goat, Butter Pecan, was not her last. In time the herd would grow to more than 100 goats. The Chechalks would show goats at local fairs, the Montreal Expo and the Royal Winter Agricultural Fair.

When back on the farm, they would milk the goats and send the milk to Hewitt's Dairy. After 25 years, with their children off to college and becoming young adults, the Chechalks sold most of the herd.

They still have about 11 goats and about 40 sheep.

Many years ago Chechalk was in Carruthers Printing when she heard Margaret Comfort was retiring from her role writing the recipes page for Niagara Farmers' Monthly, Cosby recalled. She quickly sent in her resume to publisher Steve Ecker, who hired her.



Ann Marie Chechalk, winner of the 2024 lifetime achievement award from the Niagara Federation of Agriculture, with her husband Mike. ~ Luke Edwards photos

That began a long career as one of the main contributors to the paper, continuing on even after the paper was sold to Metroland. Her work continued to appear until the paper's run ended last fall.

Her byline reappeared in last month's inaugural edition of Niagara Farms, a hopeful sign of things to come.

Dignitaries who spoke at the ceremony one by one reiterated Chechalk's strong support of both Niagara's agriculture sector as a whole, and for rural youth specifically.

West Lincoln Mayor Cheryl Ganann, a former educator, said Chechalk has played a key role in turning local youth into well-rounded adults.

"I think about the number of lives she's touched," Ganann said.

Niagara Falls MP Tony Baldinelli called her a "tireless advocate of agriculture, farming and rural values in Niagara."

In typical fashion, Chechalk was quick to redirect the spotlight, mentioning some of her favourite memories were of 4-H members beaming with pride as they showed their goats and exhibited their achievements at fairs and other events.

"Some of the most exciting times of my life were with 4-H," she said.

She also extolled the virtues of the club, pointing out that she had always been a shy person, but 4-H helped her overcome that shyness. While she was still nervous to be up at the podium and the centre of attention, participating in 4-H made it easier for her.

"I made the right choice when I became a 4-H leader and parent."



Niagara Federation of Agriculture president Chris Mullet Koop presents Ann Marie Chechalk with her lifetime achievement award.





AWARDS NIGHT 2024

Young scholarship winners show a passion for agriculture

By Luke Edwards

If the bios of the scholarship recipients honoured at last month's Niagara Federation of Agriculture awards night is any indication, the region's agricultural future is in good hands.

Three young people heading off to college and university received kudos and a little financial support courtesy the Jeff Yungblut Memorial Scholarship and the NFA scholarship. Winners included Gracie Lodewyk, Simon Heeringa and Morgan McGee.

"She's always happy to lend a helping hand," said Brad Comfort, introducing Lodewyk.

"And she's always had a passion for agriculture."

Lodewyk has been accepted into the agricultural science program at the University of Guelph. For years she has helped her family sell farm products, including garlic, eggs, chickens, turkeys, goats and puppies, through their Rapha Ridge Farm name.

In 2019 she became involved with Niagara 4-H, winning reserve and grand champion showperson awards at local fairs.

She has also gone overseas to take part in agriculture-related



Gracie Lodewyk won a Jeff Yungblut Memorial Scholarship this year. She's pictured here with Nancy and Jim Yungblut.. ~ Luke Edwards photo

volunteer projects in Ethiopia and Israel.

Heeringa and his family live on a hobby farm in Smithville.

"His love for animals led him to join the Niagara 4-H dairy calf club," said Comfort.

After eight years as a member, his passion has only grown, and he's planning to go to Ridgetown College in the fall, where he'll study in the associate diploma in agriculture co-op program.

"He's very passionate about the dairy sector and very interested in learning about the genetics side of the industry," Comfort said.

Heeringa recently bought his first calf through the Calves for a Causes sale that raises money for the Children's Health Foundation. He's been a junior and senior showperson and had a grand champion calf.

McGee grew up on a farm, where her family raised beef cat-

tle, pigs and chickens, and did some cash cropping. In 2017 she was given a goat and joined 4-H.

"Her love and passion for 4-H and showing goats led her to start her own herd of goats," Comfort said.

Registered in 2019, Chippawa Creek Dairy Goats has since won multiple first place and grand champion awards.

The NFA and Yungblut family present these scholarships to deserving young people each year. Nancy and Jim Yungblut started the scholarship to honour their son Jeff, who died of an unknown heart condition in 2013. The Yungblut family ran a farm in Thorold that included dairy and grapes.

"Agriculture has always been at the heart of our marriage," Nancy said.

"We're proud to be able to continue with Jeff's legacy."

An annual golf tournament in Jeff's name raises money to help fund the annual scholarship. This year's tournament saw 28 teams compete, a testament to their son's impact on the community, Jim and Nancy said. 🌿

Niagara Federation of Agriculture honours past board members

By Luke Edwards

An organization like the Niagara Federation of Agriculture can only go as far as its volunteers allow.

At the group's awards ceremony last month the past board members were honoured for their work and commitment over the past year. President Chris Mullet Koop presented the past members with a small gift basket as a token of their appreciation.

Past members included: Ken Durham, John Wiens, Arden Vaughn, Don Couri, Linda Grimo, Torrie Warner, Joe Kita, Joe Schonenberger, Joyce Sonneveld, Les Klodnicki, Ted Hessels, Murray Berring, Robert Bator, and Rose Marie Haegens.

The 2024 directors and executive are as follows:

President - Chris Mullet Koop

Vice President - Clarke Fretz and Chris Hamilton

Executive - Albert Witteveen

OFA Policy Advisor Councillors - Mike Chechalk and Jordyn Domio

Directors - Mike Chechalk, Brad Comfort, Martin Dim, Jordyn Domio, Clarke Fretz, Derek Funk, Chris Hamilton, Ian Johnston, Chris Mullet Kop, Jim Morrison, Curtis Wiley and Albert Witteveen.

Member Service Rep - Conor Warren

OFA Zone Director - Drew Spoelstra

Secretary/Treasurer - Maryanne Mous 🌿



Some of the past board members for the Niagara Federation of Agriculture were in attendance at last month's awards night. From left: Ken Durham, John Wiens, Arden Vaughn, Don Couri, Linda Grimo, and Torrie Warner. In behind is president Chris Mullet Koop and in front is secretary/treasurer Maryanne Mous. ~ Luke Edwards photo

Swierenga honoured as a farm and food ‘champion’

Longtime Niagara farming advocate recognized for his work supporting Ontario’s farming community

By Niagara Farms Staff

A dependable presence in Niagara’s ag community, Farm and Food Care Ontario has honoured Henry Swierenga for his unwavering devotion to promoting the industry that ensures we have food on the table every day.

Swierenga received the organization’s Farm and Food Care Champion award at an event held in Elora last month. Given out each year since 1999, the award honours a group or individual who has shown significant public outreach and support for Ontario’s farming community, a press release said.

“Henry is a true advocate of the agriculture industry and, although retired from the OFA, still volunteers in the organization and implementation of several agriculture-related events and programs,” said Niagara Federation of Agriculture president Chris Mullett Koop in a letter of support.

Swierenga had a long career with the OFA, and continues his support as a volunteer with events such as Breakfast on the Farm, the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair, and Niagara Farm Day. More recently he’s become involved with the organizing committee for the 2025 International Plowing Match and Rural Expo, which will take place in Niagara.

The OFA nominated Swierenga for the award, with letters of sup-



From left: Past chair and board member Bruce Christie presents the 2024 Food & Farming Champion award to winner Henry Swierenga, alongside the MPP Lisa Thompson, minister of agriculture food and rural affairs, and FFCO chair Crispin Colvin. ~ FFCO photo

port also coming in from Mullett Koop, and the OFA’s Joanne Fuller. Bruce Christie, a past chair and board member of FFCO, along with Ontario Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs Lisa Thompson presented Swierenga with the award. It took place at the FFCO’s conference.

In the nomination papers, Swierenga’s energetic and enthusiastic support for the agriculture sector was on full display.

“We are so lucky to have Henry’s passion, knowledge and

experience still advocating for Ontario farmers, which makes him a perfect recipient for the champion award.” Fuller said. “Henry’s continued commitment shines through when he volunteers for every Breakfast on the Farm that Farm & Food Care organizes. I know when I am signing up to help that Henry will also be there.”

Thompson called it a “pleasure to recognize a dedicated advocate like” Swierenga.

“Through his ongoing commitment, Henry shines a light on how

Ontario’s agriculture and food industry continues to grow, meeting both domestic and global market demand, while promoting the very best of rural communities.”

Farm & Food Care Ontario is a coalition of farmers, agriculture and food partners proactively working together to ensure public trust and confidence in food and farming. For more information visit, www.FarmFoodCareON.org.



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Sharing a Glass, and untold stories of Niagara's wine women

By Luke Edwards

Niagara's grape and wine industry didn't grow into the behemoth it is today on its own. It took the hard work, commitment and prowess of many key people to get to that destination. However, for years there was a group of those industry builders who went largely overlooked.

A new book written by Jennifer Wilhelm aims to fix that. Called *Sharing a Glass*, it tells the stories and recounts the memories of nine women who were vital in turning a fledgling Niagara wine industry into a globally recognized destination.

At a launch event held last month at Niagara College, where she's an educator, Wilhelm expressed deep thanks for the women who agreed to be a part of the book, including the nine who were featured as well as others who helped with writing, editing, and general support.

"We're fortunate to have these leaders and mentors," she said.

Wilhelm often tells her students to find people who can be those role models for them. It's the first stop in a journey that ultimately leads to them becoming role models themselves.

"I needed, and still need, strong and inspiring role models in my life," Wilhelm said.

She came up with the idea for the book in the most unusual of places. While attending the funeral of another winemaking titan in Niagara, Lloyd Schmidt, in 2019, Wilhelm looked around and saw all the women of the industry who had played similarly vital roles in building it up. She immediately realized their stories needed to be put to paper.

"We are stronger and wiser for knowing these stories," she said.

Work began almost right away. In time she would get nine women to agree to be featured. Their contributions range from political, in the form of former regional councillor and current Grape Growers of Ontario CEO Debbie Zimmerman, to researchers such as Helen Fisher, and glass ceiling shatterers like the first woman Grape King Donna Lailey.

"What this book will hopefully do will be marvellous," said Lailey, who hopes it will encourage the next generation of women to reach even higher.

Debi Pratt, who was involved when Inniskillin kickstarted Niagara's new wine age way back in the 1970s, said being a part of the book brought a mix of feelings.

"I was honoured to be profiled," she said, though she added "it's a very strange feeling for me to read about myself."

As much as *Sharing a Glass* is a look back, those involved said it's also a look to the future.

"To influence the next generation who may have a slight inkling to get into the wine world," said

"To influence the next generation who may have a slight inkling to get into the wine world."

Lailey.

Wilhelm agreed, pointing out some of her recent students in the crowd at the launch who she said will help take the wine industry to new heights.

And to support that, a portion of the proceeds from the book will help create a bursary at Niagara College. Elena Galey-Pride, who acted as Wilhelm's editor and who



Jennifer Wilhelm recently celebrated the launch of *Sharing a Glass*, a book she wrote that tells the stories of nine influential women in the Niagara wine industry. ~ Luke Edwards photos

the author said could easily have been the 10th woman featured had Galey-Pride's humbleness

Wilhelm called the writing process "transformational". It didn't come without struggles, though. The idea first came to her in 2019, meaning a year before COVID-19 hit. Between the pandemic, her own personal family issues and the general stresses of writing a book, Wilhelm said she relied heavily on the love and support of family and friends to get it over the finish line.

However, with the book only recently released, Wilhelm said she's already at work thinking about a second.

Sharing a Glass can be found online at Amazon or at Indigo. It can also be found at many local wineries and local bookstores, Wilhelm said. For more information, visit sharingaglass.com. 🍷



Some of the women featured in *Sharing a Glass* pose for a photo with author Jennifer Wilhelm.



Donna Lailey, the first woman Grape King and one of nine women featured in *Sharing a Glass*, signs a copy of the book at a launch event held last month.

AT THE MARKET

Business is 'blooming' at Adam's Flora

By Luke Edwards

He didn't realize it at the time, but Dan Moran would find healing from the loss of his father in the unlikelyst of places: a farmers' market.

It happened about four years ago. At the time Dan was a machine operator and his wife Britt was a hairstylist. However, Dan's father, Adam, always had a connection to flowers, growing and farming. So after his death, the couple took stock of where they were in life, and what made them happy.

"He was my best friend and he loved farming and natural things," said Dan. "We decided we weren't happy with what we were doing."

They started propagating house plants on the side, which eventually turned into a business that they named after Dan's father.

Adam's Flora opened a bricks and mortar store in downtown St. Catharines in 2022, but can also be found at local farmers' markets, including Port Colborne, Welland and St. Catharines.

While they still consider themselves urban farmers, growth in their business has meant they also source products from local farms.

Beyond the florals they sell, Britt and Dan have also begun adding other related products. This spring they began offering "lavenade" at the St. Catharines market. A lavender drink, Britt said it's been a popular addition. They're hoping to use more edible flowers to create new foods and drinks for people to try.

"Our goal is to spread into floral ice cream, eventually, using stuff that we grow," Britt said.

Being able to set up a table at the local markets has been a thrill for the couple, giving them a chance to interact with people. It was a far cry from Dan's former job.



Mairi Frere works at Adam's Flora, a regular at the Port Colborne, Welland and St. Catharines farmers' markets. ~ Luke Edwards photo

"It's great, you talk to a lot of awesome people," he said. "It's really enjoyable."

Their storefront is at 144 St. Paul St., though in April they announced plans to move three doors down.

For more information, visit adamsflora.ca.

To nominate a local vender for our monthly "AT THE MARKET" feature, contact Luke Edwards at luke@granthaven.com

St. Catharines market kicks into high gear

By Luke Edwards

The April showers have come and gone, now it's time for the May flowers. And eventually fruits, vegetables and everything else grown here in Niagara.

On Saturday, May 18 the St. Catharines Farmers' Market will be extending outdoors for the spring and summer season. While the market runs year round, it gets pared back in the winter months. But with spring here and summer on its way, the market will need extra space.

To celebrate the expansion for the summer season, the market team is planning a few special activities for May 18. Mayor Mat Siscoe will be on hand for a special welcome at 9 a.m. He'll be followed by the Vox Violins, who will be live on stage beginning at 9:30 a.m. and kicking off the Music in the Square series that continues with different local musicians for the rest of the spring and summer.

May 18 also marks the kickoff of the community engagement series at the market. NPAAMB Indigenous Employment and Training will be the first organization featured.

With the expanded size there will also be expanded hours. Starting May 18 the Saturday market will run until 2 p.m. This marks a return to pre-COVID 19 hours.

There's also a new market information booth featuring market swag, treats and a market basket giveaway at noon.

The St. Catharines market takes place twice a week, on Thursdays and Saturdays. The Thursday market also takes place from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Market Square is located downtown, at 91 King St. For more information visit stcatharines.ca.



The St. Catharines Market will be expanding for the summer months beginning May 18. ~ Luke Edwards photo

The Farmers' Market of Grimsby ready to hit the street

By Michelle Seaborn, Grimsby Farmers' Market manager

After months of planning, several committee meetings and lots of last-minute details, the Farmers' Market of Grimsby is ready to hit the street – literally. The market will open for the 17th consecutive season on Main Street between Christie and Ontario Streets beginning Thursday, May 30 from 3 until 7 p.m. Note that the road will be closing to vehicular traffic by 1:30 and reopen by 8. Many of our previous vendors will be returning along with a great group of new faces that will join us this year.

To be considered a farmers' market, more than 50 per cent of the vendors must be farmers or growers of the product they bring to the market. This of course will include the three local wineries that will feature their VQA wines. The market is pleased with the variety of food vendors who will have ready to eat or take-home meals as well. A regular group of 36 vendors will call Main Street in Grimsby home for 20 Thursday afternoons this spring and summer.

The seasonality of farmers' markets means that the early growing season will feature asparagus, peas, a variety of lettuces, hothouse

cucumbers, and tomatoes. It won't be long until the first strawberries hit the tables too. Of course, our over-wintering vegetables and fruit will be available such as potatoes, onion, garlic, apples, pears.

The market is going to feature a plant sale to coincide with the Ladies Spring Shopping event sponsored by the Grimsby Downtown Business Improvement Area merchants being held on Thursday, May 9. It will be a great opportunity to meet some of the regular market vendors and pick up some seedlings, vegetable and flower plants, cut flowers, potted plants, perennials, small bushes, and heritage seeds. The plant sale will be held on the outdoor patio behind Teddy's Sport Bar on Main Street and run from 4 until 8 p.m.

While the big plans are well underway, there are some plans in the works for several special events this year. Of course, we will have music each week by one of our local musicians, and Halaloo will be twisting balloons into amazing shapes, we may even see a face painter from time to time. The return of the popular Teddy Bear Picnic in July will be a memorable event for children and their favourite teddy to attend. We are working on other plans for fundraisers, special cooking classes, the re-introduction of our market buck program and several other events that are still being investigated.

Come to Grimsby, enjoy the music, shop for fresh local products, visit one of our fine restaurants for a family dinner or grab a take home meal. We will be waiting for you ...on the Street.



Niagara Regional Exhibition returns to Welland

By Niagara Farms Staff

Farm fair lovers can get an early start on the fun with the return of the Niagara Regional Exhibition this spring.

While many fairs take place in the fall, the NRE in Welland runs from Friday, May 31 to Sunday, June 2 at the fairgrounds on Niagara Street. Organized by the Niagara Regional Agricultural Society, this year's three-day fair features much of the familiar fair fun one would come to expect.

Exhibits will be on display throughout the weekend, along with animal shows, including a poultry show with the help of the Niagara Feather Fanciers Club.

Truck and tractor pulls take place on the Saturday, and the demolition derby on Sunday.

A midway returns and runs all weekend, along with pony rides, music, a beer garden and more.

Gates are open Friday, May 31 from 4 to 10 p.m., Saturday from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.

With the NRAS on track to sell the property, this marks one of the final years for the fair at the current location. At an AGM held earlier this year the organization said they expect to remain on Niagara Street for the next three to five years while they find a new permanent location.

A post on their Facebook page also said the society is in need of volunteers for the fair. A recruiting event was held in late April, but those interested in volunteering can still reach out through Facebook or visit niagaraex.com to see if there are opportunities or for more information on the event.



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Greening the Landscape consortium looking ahead to next phase of research

By Luke Edwards

It takes a village to grow a tree.

And for the past three years a research consortium led by Vineland Research and Innovation Centre has worked to get everyone on the same page when it comes to ensuring urban trees are given the best shot at survival, beginning right from their early days as a sapling in a nursery to after it's moved to wherever it'll call home for the rest of its life. With the consortium transitioning to its next phase this summer, members were invited to VRIC last month to learn about some of the research findings and take part in soil testing and tree planting demonstrations.

Rhoda deJonge, director of plant response and environment at VRIC, said the Greening the Landscape consortium is trying to find research solutions that aren't just focused on one part of the process.

"How do we get better alignment between those who grow the trees and sell the trees, and those that buy the trees?" she said.

The first three years of the consortium saw members participate in knowledge sharing exercises and five case studies that explored topics like which species should be chosen, training and tools, public perceptions and best practices for soil maintenance.

DeJonge said the consortium was vital because urban forestry research is needed, but the work doesn't fit into any of the traditional boxes. Greening the Landscape provided a spot for that research to not only take place but be put to good use.

"The last thing we want to do is have research that sits on the shelf," she said.

During the afternoon demonstrations, members learned some of the basics of soil testing and how they can test for things such as organic matter or soil compaction. In a second demonstration, they learned about tree planting and some of the common pitfalls and mistakes that can be made.

With the case studies for the first round wrapping up, deJonge said the consortium will



Soil scientist Jason Henry shows Greening the Landscape consortium members how to deal with a root bound tree before transplanting it. ~ Luke Edwards photos

be coming up with new topics to research this summer. The next phase begins in July.

More information can be found at vinelandresearch.com, under the Innovation Program, Plant Responses and the Environment sub-heads. 🌿



A member of the Greening the Landscape consortium puts all her muscle into getting a soil sample.



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Oppenlaender, Watson re-elected to lead Grape Growers of Ontario

**Organization announces
2024/2025 board of directors**

By Niagara Farms Staff

There will be some familiar faces at the head of the Grape Growers of Ontario for the next year.

Matthias Oppenlaender and Kevin Watson have been re-elected as chair and vice chair, respectively, for 2024/2025. The duo will continue to lead the organization that represents more than 500 grape growers in Ontario's three designated viticulture areas.

First elected as chair in 2016, Oppenlaender has a long history of leadership within the GGO. He also spent several years as vice chair, and on top of that is also chair of Ontario Grape and Wine Research Inc., treasurer for the Canadian Grapevine Certification Network, GGO representative on the Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Growers' Association board of directors and management committee, and is chair of OFV-GA's finance committee.

He's been a grape grower in Niagara-on-the-Lake since moving here from Germany in the mid-1980s.

Watson, meanwhile, has been involved in the grape and wine industry since 1978. His family farms 100 acres of certified sustainable vineyards. He became vice chair of the GGO in 2022, and also spent time on the growers' committee and on the board of directors.



Matthias Oppenlaender has been re-elected as chair of the Grape Growers of Ontario. ~ GGO photos

He's also the GGO representative for F.A.R.M.S. and VQA.

The GGO did welcome a new member onto the board. Jeff Duc is a third-generation grape grower in NOTL and a Niagara College grad who also spent time learning the craft at a small winery in Australia.



Kevin Watson will return as GGO's vice chair for the upcoming year.

He's been on the grape growers committee for the past six years.

The GGO board includes members from across the province, split into six districts.



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Greenbelt Foundation opens up soil testing project to Niagara farmers

By Luke Edwards

Grain and oilseeds farmers in Niagara can sign up for a new soil testing project offered by the Greenbelt Foundation and partners.

The foundation launched its Soil Health Testing Program last year, with the goal of getting 300 to 500 farms signed up across the Golden Horseshoe. The first intake included farms in Hamilton, Halton, and Peel in 2023, with additional farms in Niagara, York and Durham being sampled this year.

“We’re looking to get a really good coverage of soils across the Niagara region,” said Ryan Carlow, a soil health specialist with the foundation.

With the help of the American-based Soil Health Institute, participating farmers will receive measurements for organic carbon concentration, carbon mineralization potential, aggregate stability, permanganate-oxidizable carbon and available water holding capacity.

Farmers will receive free sampling this year and the next two years. Once the sampling is finished, farmers will receive a “report card” of sorts, Carlow said. The customized soil report will compare soil health in their fields to similar soils in the region. The program also provides one-on-one support



The Greenbelt Foundation is opening a soil testing program to farms in Niagara this year. In the photo is soil health specialist Ryan Carlow. ~ Greenbelt Foundation photo

from experts, helping farmers set goals and overcome barriers to improving soil health.

“It gives a really good understanding of where a field is at,” Carlow said.

In addition to the Greenbelt Foundation and Soil Health Institute, several organizations are involved, including the Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association, Soils at Guelph,

Ontario Certified Crop Advisor Association and Conservation Ontario.

The Weston Family Foundation’s Soil Health Initiative and provincial government is helping fund the project.

For more information on the project or to sign up, visit greenbelt.ca/greenbelt_soil_health.

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Horses spring into training for 127th season at Fort Erie Race Track

Trainers and jockeys hit the dirt to prepare for May 28 season opener

By Niagara Farms Staff

It'll soon be time to let the horses run again.

Racing at the Fort Erie Race Track returns May 28, with two \$30,000 cup races, including the Sprint Into Summer Cup and the Summer Solstice Cup. Racing will resume most Tuesdays throughout the summer, with several additional dates scattered in.

The track opened for training in mid-April, and though Fort Erie was struck with several days of rain, trainers were nevertheless excited to be back on the dirt oval.

"It's always great to be back. We're like a big family here in the backstretch, so to see everyone again is a lot of fun," said Ken Abu, a longtime trainer at Fort Erie with more than 1,600 starts since 2001.

The track's signature race and second jewel of the Canadian Triple Crown, the Prince of Wales Stakes, takes place on Sept. 10.

There are also Monday live race dates set this summer, as well as a few special Sunday dates. A new Sunday racing date this year is July 7, which coincides with Fort Foodie Fest.

"The Sunday races are great because the track is always so busy, the local fans seem



Fan favourite Hiatus, trained by Jeff Voyce, gets out for a quick two-minute-lick courtesy of jockey Ismael Mosqueira, last month as spring training kicked off at Fort Erie Race Track. ~ James Culic photo

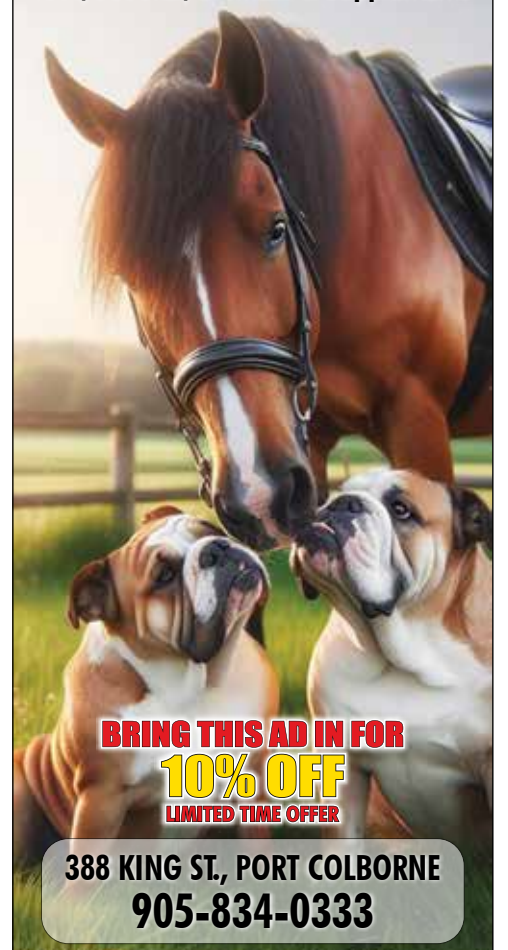
to really enjoy those weekend races," said Abu.

Outside the horse racing, the track's usual cast of special events is returning, including wiener dog races on July 21,

and the basset hound and corgi races on Aug. 18.

For a full live racing schedule, and a complete list of events and stakes races, visit www.forterieracing.com.

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Niagara Christian Gleaners: 'an economical way to transform growers' produce'

In 2018, the Niagara Christian Gleaners (NCG) opened a dehydration plant in West Lincoln in order to feed food-insecure populations both internationally and domestically. Not surprisingly to them, area farmers' generosity to provide vegetables and fruits to this Smithville-area plant is so positive that the plant expanded.

This non-profit group takes surplus produce from the Niagara-Haldimand-Norfolk area, and dehydrates it into bags of quality product that keeps well in both hot and cold climates.

"Canada is a net producer of food - we likely can't eat everything we produce," said general manager, Pete Wierenga. "For instance, Kenya had a four-year drought, and then had the worst flood in years. Their famers who can grow food - can't - and they're hungry themselves. That is the difference between us and others."

In 2023, the Gleaners processed a record 1,466,253 kg (3,232,534 pounds) of fresh vegetables and fruit, more than double its total combined production in 2019 and 2020.

"Our current production rate fills approximately one sea container per month, or 1.2 million servings of food," said Wierenga. "This translates into 13.1 million servings of food aid which landed in nine different countries."

Farmers truck in trailer loads of surplus and graded-out produce. From there, approximately 80 volunteers re-wash, peel, chop, and cut off blemishes and skins. They then enter these pieces into a dicer, which reduces them into three-eighth inched cubes. They layer the cubes on trays for dehydration, measuring 21 trays per rack, totaling 700 trays per dryer. Dehydration begins in the afternoon, with a change-out crew coming in at night to complete the process.

The end product is attractive and nutritious. For example, Wierenga said that one package of pears, parsnips and carrots yield a four-cup, family-sized quantity, with 27 servings per bag. Each NCG box provides approximately 500 servings.

"It's an economical way to transform the growers' produce," Wierenga explained.



Volunteers handle the morning production from intake to bagging and storing the finished product. ~ Contributed photos

Several aid groups vetted by the NCG later remove and ship the completed sea containers.

"They (distributors) connect with us and seek out our food. They're the boots on the ground and know where the need is. They know how to get it there and not have it in-

tercepted for sale. We keep the list short so that we are sure of that it gets there."

The distributors usually ship out full containers; however, one organization, St Catharine's Warehouse of Hope, recently took a

Continued on page A15 →




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Gleaners turn surplus produce into food aid

→ **Continued from page A14**

partial container in order to blend in school and hospital aid for the Ukraine, said Wierenga.

Their motivation is the biblical mandate of gleaning, in which God instructs farmers to leave a portion of their crops in the fields for the poor to gather or “glean” (notably in Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Exodus and Ruth).

“We’re unashamedly a Christian organization-- we do it in Christ’s name,” said Wierenga.

People from all age groups, including youth, share this vision: the NCG utilized more than 60,000 volunteer hours in 2023 in order to transform the produce into dehydrated nourishment. The Gleaners also welcome visitors and school groups to view their work and learn about food insecurity and social justice.

NCG is loosely affiliated with the original Ontario Christian Gleaners near Cambridge. However, both groups have separate plants, websites, volunteers and boards of directors. When the Cambridge site ramped up its production with more tractor trailer loads of produce, Wierenga

said that several Niagara residents believed that they could replicate this need locally.

“It was a small group of visionary people in 2015 who thought they could set up their own plant. They knew that there would be a number of volunteers who would come to serve in Niagara. Ontario Christian Gleaners were at capacity – they saw that there would be enough food available for more dehydration.”

NCG began construction on their West Lincoln site in 2018. Wierenga said that they raised the \$2.5 million dollars needed to build it entirely through donations with no government funding. It opened five months later debt-free.

The Niagara plant quickly reached capacity as “the need for food was great,” said Wierenga.

In 2021 the group installed an additional natural gas dehydrator. “The second dehydrator doubled capacity,” said Wierenga.

The current expansion totals 5,000 square feet, providing provide additional storage, including two new coolers for the intercepted produce and finished packages. “We’re in the home stretch with the building, but the coolers

and equipment need completion, hopefully by summer,” said Wierenga.

The Gleaners installed a heat recovery system on Dryer Number 2. Its units capture available heat from their exhaust air and reroute it into the incoming air way; it’s a means of preheating the air before it enters the dryers. Another recovery system for the other dryer is currently in the works.

“We were spending upwards to \$10,000 on natural gas. Our large operating budget depends upon donors.”

While NCG’s figures seem impressive, Wierenga fingers farmers as the “key piece” of this work. “We give it all away. The giver is really the growers; we transform it into dehydrated food which has an almost infinite shelf life, is stable, and has a condensed size so put a lot in a sea container, product can land in any climate with little or no refrigeration.”

“Our piece of the puzzle is transforming that produce into something safe and transportable.”



Several select aid agencies distribute the Niagara Christian Gleaners’ food to places in need.



Niagara Christian Gleaners’ volunteer corps relies upon people of all ages.



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Fruit and vegetable growers adopting sustainability practices, study finds

By Niagara Farms Staff

In fields, orchards and greenhouses, farmers have been growing more than just tasty fruits and vegetables, a new study suggests.

They've also been growing their sustainability practices.

On Earth Day, the Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Growers' Association released a study conducted with the help of the Vineland Research and Innovation Centre that showed a strong move over the past two decades towards sustainable practices by a large swath of Ontario's fruit and vegetable growers.

"This study shows very clearly that Ontario's fruit and vegetable growers are prioritizing sustainable production and have voluntarily been making major strides in the last two decades to adopt practices that support both environmental and economic sustainability," said Shawn Brenn, a vegetable grower and chair of the Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Growers' Association (OFVGA), in a news release. "We're a proud part of Ontario's food system and we want Ontarians to know that



A study by Vineland Research and Innovation Centre has found fruit and vegetable growers have embraced sustainability measures. ~ Pixabay photo

we're doing our part to ensure a greener future for all of us."

Highlights from the study include the following:

- Water efficient irrigation systems, insulation for energy efficiency and biological pest control systems are used by 95 per cent of respondents in the greenhouse sector. Two thirds said they installed more efficient boilers, climate control and irrigation systems over the last 20 years, along with heat storage and energy curtains.
- For outdoor growers, 85 per cent said they're using crop scouting and pest monitoring to target crop protection so that applications are only applied as needed. Four out of five use soil test results to be more precise with fertilizer application. Nearly as many, 78 per cent, use cover crops.
- Growers adopt sustainable practices for these top reasons: cost savings, a desire to be environmentally sustainable, and because they believe it improves the quality of their products.
- Top challenges include, for outdoor growers: implementation cost vs. return on investment, a minimal margin to adopt practices due to high operating costs, and a lack of time and capacity to experiment with new practices and technologies. For greenhouse operators, an additional challenge identified were regulatory hurdles to overcome.
- The majority of growers follow at least one sustainability certification program or assessment, with 96 per cent of greenhouse operators and 78 per cent of outdoor operators saying they do. The Environmental Farm Plan is the most popular.
- Generally speaking, it found growers are willing to make continued changes. Respondents said addressing larger issues regarding competitiveness, taxation, red tape and regulatory burdens will make it easier for them to transition to more sustainable practices. Incentive programs would also help, the study found.

"We've made tremendous progress in the last two decades, and growers are willing to do more, but farms need to also be financially viable, which includes a streamlined regulatory environment, financial investments and the consumer support," said greenhouse grower Jan VanderHout, chair of the OFVGA Environment and Conservation committee. "Fruit and vegetable production is an essential pillar of our local food system and it's critical to Canada's national security that we do everything we can to preserve and protect our ability to grow healthy, safe and sustainable produce." 🌱



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Fleeter Farm Kids program supports two young entrepreneurs

It was a 'hoppy' surprise for one, and quite the 'coop' for the other, as the Wainfleet Agricultural Society awarded two ambitious youngsters with a \$500 grant each.

Reed Bellis and Sameul Klapwyk won this year's Fleeter Farm Kids contest. They were among a group of kids from across Niagara who submitted applications outlining their agricultural business ideas.

"All the entries were very good," said Dan Bath, first vice president of the ag society, adding the two winners stood out for their creativity and strong business plan.

For Bellis, an avid 4-H kid, her plan is to start a meat rabbit business. She's been a member of the 4-H rabbit club, keeping her own pet rabbits, but her plan is to transition and include a business aspect. Her business plan includes building cages with wheels to allow them to be moved around.

"It's a secure way to keep them safe and free," she said, adding she was very happy when she found out she'd won the contest.

Bellis doesn't just take part in the rabbit club for 4-H. She's participated in several other, including horse, plowing, canine and cooking.

"I get to hang out with the leaders and have fun with the animals," she said, explaining what she likes about the club.

For Klapwyk, his plan is to expand a chicken operation he already has. The nearly 10-year-old keeps a few chickens on the family farm, selling the eggs to friends and neighbours.

"I feed them, water them and collect the eggs. And I clean the cages," he said.

This was the second year for the contest, which Bath said is an opportunity to focus on encouraging agriculture among young people, one of the pillars of the ag society beyond organizing the fair.

"It's one of the most important things, in my opinion," he said, adding the society hopes the contest can inspire young people to consider careers in agriculture later in life.

A panel of five judges review all the submissions on a variety of criteria. They also adjust scores based on the applicants age so younger children have an equal shot. This year they opened the contest up to children beyond Wainfleet.

Bath encouraged families and children to get an early start on their business plans for next year's contest. Applications generally open on March 1, and remain open until April 1.

In the meantime, the society is also hard at work preparing for the Wainfleet Fall Fair. The theme for this year's fair is "honeybees and maple trees." It will take place Sept. 19 to 21. For more information visit wainfleetfallfair.com.



The Wainfleet Agricultural Society awarded its two \$500 Fleeter Farm Kid grants to Sameul Klapwyk (left) and Reed Bellis (middle). WAS first vice president Dan Bath (right) said the two stood out among many impressive submissions.

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New hazelnut cultivars of interest to Ontario producers under development

Encouraging Linda Grimo of Grimo Nut Nursery to describe the properties of a mythical Ontario hazelnut varietal 'unicorn' is a cheerful matter of a few moments.

"I would say high yielding, disease resistant, cold weather hardy... the nuts are full, the taste is great," smiled Grimo during the 15th Annual Ontario Hazelnut Association (OHA) symposium Thur., Mar. 21 inside Tillsonburg's Royal Canadian Legion, Branch #153.

"Size or shape?" she continued, warming to the exercise. "Not too small, a decent-sized nut is fine, even a medium size, just not too small."

Grimo completed her description in under 30 seconds. Coming up with a new cultivar however, 'unicorn' or not, takes considerably longer.

"It's really a long process."

A hazelnut cultivar breeding program takes 18 years to complete says Grimo, from start to public availability. New varieties won't produce nuts until year three she continued, not in enough numbers of nuts to evaluate fully until year five. The best selections are identified over the next three to four years.

"You are fine-tuning that list."

Following year eight, the stars, so to speak, are identified and the process of repeating the trial plantings/assessment cycle begins.

The biggest players in the hazelnut breeding world are located at Oregon State University (OSU) in Corvallis, Oregon and Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey. Universities in Minnesota and Wisconsin are also collaborating on the Upper Midwest Hazelnut Development Initiative. The program is looking at adapting the disease-resistant and cold-hardy trees that produce small American hazelnuts by selecting the best of them that will produce economically viable-sized nuts.

"They've gotten a lot of work done," said Grimo.

There is also ongoing research at The University of Guelph under Professor Emeritus Alan Dale, and from a number of smaller breeders including Grimo's own program, initiated after Linda's father Ernie founded the company in 1973.

In very basic terms the search for new cultivars applicable to this province focuses on three main factors: Eastern Filbert Blight (EFB) resistance, cold hardiness of both tree and catkin, and yield.

EFB is a fungal infection which can render orchards economically unproductive. Rather than a single strain, Grimo describes it "moreso as 12 identifiable strains that share similarities."

"The strains are not real strains, they are groups based on similarities in their DNA."

Variety in strain and geographical dispersion and varying effect per strain on different cultivars complicates breeding for EFB resistance. Grimo Nut Nursery has two cultivars in development that are showing both cold hardiness and EFB resistance, says Grimo.

"I'd love to be able to say immune, but no one can anymore."

She uses the example of Gene and Slate hazelnut trees, which have not been affected by EFB for 70 years.



Linda and Ernie Grimo continue to be leading proponents of Ontario's hazelnut industry.

"But I still can't call them immune because maybe there is an area with a blight that can affect them."

Cold hardiness refers not only to the tree but also its catkins during the crucial pollen shedding and receiving period. There is a science to hazelnut pollination beginning with compatibility in both alleles (genes) and the timing of pollen shed and flower receptivity. Oregon has

Following year eight, the stars, so to speak, are identified and the process of repeating the trial plantings/assessment cycle begins.

a comparatively forgiving three-month span for the latter compared to Southern Ontario's one-month window.

"As you get colder, that window for pollination shrinks," says Grimo.

Catkins which shed pollen are also susceptible to a freeze event during that window. There are offsetting factors to that concern however, including John Kelsey's studies from West Virginia on how a portion of catkins may freeze, but other parts may survive and still emit pollen.

Secondly, she recommends orchard design with a minimum of four cultivars, thereby diversifying shed/receive timing.

"Unless that (freeze) event happens for four weeks during pollination, it's not going to affect everything."

In that sense, hazelnut production's complexity can also be its strength, compared to, for example, freeze event devastation Grimo has witnessed in peach orchards surrounding their nursery. Typically, hazelnuts will retain some level of production.

"That's almost always the case."

To reiterate, breeding new cultivars is a lengthy process but also one which is ongoing in several key locations throughout North America with the potential to positively impact Ontario growers. Beyond the two varieties in development at her own nursery, Grimo is aware of four at OSU and another four at Rutgers.

"That's why breeders still breed, it's that elusive perfection everyone is looking for," she smiled.

There is a level of competition, but rising above that, an understanding of the value collaboration brings. People share research readily says Grimo in a collective effort to move the industry forward.

"Some might see Ontario as a small cog in a big wheel," she concluded, "But everyone is working together to keep that wheel turning."



Consider long-term weather trend predictions, but be prepared for fluctuations says Environment Canada meteorologist

There is a joke about the weather in various Canadian locations, in which the punchline states: If you don't like it, wait an hour and it will change.

Formulaic translation into an equivalent 'funny' on climactic change is not however as simple as extending the timeframe.

Anecdotally, this winter's lack of ice fishing opportunities, maple syrup tapping timing and experiencing a thunder hailstorm while boiling sap in February provides some indication of historically unusual southern Ontario conditions. Accurately quantifying that within appropriate context is however considerably more complicated.

'Weather' recognizes day-to-day locational fluctuations explains Environment and Climate Change Canada Meteorologist Gerald Cheng. 'Climate change' instead happens over both an extended time period and wider geographical range.

"Not just one station."

Complicating the process further is the reality equipment has changed over the extended timeframe required for a data set applicable to changes in climate. One needs to "clean the noise" says Cheng, additionally interpreting data as accurately as possible through a broader, holistic approach.

"It's suggestive but not conclusive," he said. "We still have to dig further."

'Climate change' instead happens over both an extended time period and wider geographical range.

"We want to ensure what we see, is."

One can pull historical 1961-1990 and 1991-2020 data on monthly normals recorded through the Delhi weather station, compare them to each other and add monthly 2022 and 2023 numbers and 2024, through to April 11. And while they'll be interesting and possibly include indications of a trend or two, they will unfortunately not provide a definitive roadmap



Gerald Cheng, Warning Preparedness Meteorologist with Environment and Climate Change Canada.



'Be prepared' for a variety of weather is the best advice for Ontario farmers looking forward to getting crops in the ground and pushing them on through to harvest.

for southern Ontario farmers facing the 2024 growing season.

"When you look in and drill down you will see fluctuation," said Cheng. "And fluctuation is what you have to deal with."

To a layman's untrained eye, comparing the graphed data from 30-year averages between 1961 and 1990; and 1991 and 2020 indicates temperatures have gone up roughly a degree between the two time periods while precipitation has levelled out slightly month to month.

For interest and to illustrate the fluctuations Cheng speaks of compared to 30-year averages, the 2022, 2023 and early 2024 numbers break down as follows:

2022 Precipitation Average High Low Median Temperature

January	46.5 mm	-3.0	-13.9	-8.4
February	92.3	0.5	-9.8	-4.6
March	63.8	5.8	-3.5	-1.2
April	61.1	12.3	0.9	6.6
May	63.6	21.3	8.9	15.1
June	80	25.6	12.4	19.0
July	56.7	27.1	14.5	20.9
August	58.2	27.0	14.4	20.7
September	75	22.0	10.7	16.3
October	36.9	16.0	0.1	9.5
November	35.3	9.8	-0.1	4.9
December	67.1	2.6	-3.6	-0.5

2023 Precipitation Average High Low Median Temperature

January	89 mm	2.0	-3.6	-0.8
February	74	3.4	-5.8	-1.2
March	144.1	4.7	-3.8	0.5
April	117	14.4	2.5	8.4
May	30.2	20.7	4.8	12.8
June	83.3	24.9	11.8	18.3
July	157.6	26.5	15.1	20.8
August	79.9	24.5	13.0	18.7
September	76.8	23.0	11.3	17.2
October	63.3	16.2	6.8	11.5
November	51.3	8.5	-2.1	3.2
December	76.5	5.7	-0.3	2.7

2024 Precipitation Average High Low Median Temperature

January	152.7 mm	0.2	-5.2	-2.5
February	44.7	5.2	-9.8	0.0

March	62.3	8.7	-3.5	3.6
To April 11	31	13.3	0.9	7.8

Thirty-year averages tend to smooth things out. However, of note, for example, is January precipitation of 46.5 mm in 2022 compared to roughly twice that in 2023 (89 mm), and again roughly, three times the 2022 value in the first month of this year (152.7 mm). Temperatures also exhibited similar discrepancies, average lows of -13.9, -3.6 and -5.2 respectively for those three month-long periods.

The fluctuations also illustrate the impossibility of making weather predictions based on historical numbers. There is also significant variance with the percentage predictions based even on the best possible forward-looking data.

For example, Environment Canada predictions suggest a 53 per cent chance temperatures will be above normal through April, May and June of this year, in this area.

"However, what you're asking is what about the other 47 per cent?" Cheng continued.

Predictions for 'near normal' temperatures come in at 32 per cent he said, below normal at 14 per cent.

"It gives you a signal, but it doesn't rule out possibilities for other scenarios."

Similarly, there is a 36 per cent prediction for above normal precipitation through the three-month period, a 34 per cent possibility of normal values and a 31 per cent chance of below normal, a roughly equal division.

Weather station data does provide valuable short and longer-term insights into both weather and climate.

"But it takes time to arrive at what that means."

And in conclusion, while it would be wonderful for farmers to have access to a definitive three-month outlook, the more realistic approach is to include a healthy helping of positive outlook and operational flexibility matching weather's invariable fluctuations.

"I think we have to be prepared," Cheng concluded, "that's really the message." 🌱

Ontario Hazelnut Association focus on marketing illustrates positive industry progress

The 15th Annual Ontario Hazelnut Association (OHA) symposium illustrated positive progression within a nascent industry.

While earlier events tended to focus on varietal selection and planting, this year's agenda featured multiple components investigating marketing opportunities for a growing crop.

"As the industry is growing, you want to ensure the farmers are able to commercialize their product," said University of Guelph business management PhD candidate Jonathan Parkes Thursday, March 21 in Tillsonburg.

Parkes was a featured presenter and also an enthusiastic networker, both sharing and developing information around a joint Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA)/OHA study on scalability in the provincial hazelnut industry. Operating under the direction of Dr. Kalinga Jagoda, it is titled: 'Capture the value of Ontario hazelnuts.'

"We're working hand-in-hand with the OHA on how to tap into that potential," Parkes explained.

He brings an undergraduate commerce degree in management to the table, building on that formal education in part via interviews with experienced producers. A resident of Guelph, Parkes has embraced an exercise broadening his understanding and respect for the challenges farmers face.

"It has really helped me gain an appreciation."

The study's title refers to investigating options beyond simply selling raw hazelnuts to processors in bulk, a process seen as failing to return full value to farmers. In effect, rather than simply being the core element in the supply chain, seeking opportunity along the extended value chain between producer and end consumer.

"That's essentially what we're looking at," said Parkes. "How do we tap into that and do so efficiently and effectively."

Jennifer Ross, executive director, Ontario Co-operative Association was on hand to encourage consideration of the collective approach summed up in the International Co-operative Alliance definition.

"Co-operatives are people-centred enterprises owned, controlled and run by and for their membership to realize their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations," it states.

The Ontario Co-operative Association (<https://ontario.coop>) is in effect, a co-op for co-operatives, offering educational tools and resources for close to 100 related organizations within the province.

Co-ops have a business component serving their members' needs said Ross during her presentation, as well as the cornerstone of democratic governance from their membership. They require capital to get off the ground and the willingness to work together to better accomplish goals which would be challenging individually.

She cited several co-operative enterprises as examples including Gay Lea Foods, founded by 1,300 dairy farmers in Ontario and Manito-



Jennifer Ross, executive director, Ontario Co-operative Association, spoke on the benefits of a collective approach for farmers.

ba; and the Ontario Dairy Goat Co-operative (ODGC).

The ODGC was formed by producers with the goal of marketing and shipping members'

"That's essentially what we're looking at. How do we tap into that and do so efficiently and effectively," said Parkes.

milk for the best achievable price, said Ross. New members pay a one-time membership fee and must also purchase shipping shares. In return, they receive transport, quality control services and a product pool large enough to attract and retain larger clients.

"They wouldn't be able to do that individually," said Ross. "One farmer is not going 'I have three litres of milk,' they're saying 'Our co-op has 1,000 litres.'"

It's a method of creating critical mass and dependable supply a major grocery chain would require prior to committing to adding products and dedicating space on a shelf. The approach also creates the potential for better return through negotiating from a stronger position representing larger numbers of producers with shared interest.

The co-operative model is extremely versatile says Ross.

"It's really unique to your industry, you can tailor it to what you want."

They can be run in various models including for-profit or not-for-profit, directing surplus funds directly back to members or alternatively, into industry-building initiatives. However, as other business models, they must be based on a solid and successful business plan.

"It needs to make money, it needs to be viable," said Ross.

The co-operative difference, she concluded, is in who owns the entity, who controls it and who benefits from surpluses at the end of the day.

"And why shouldn't it be the farmers?"



Jonathan Parkes was a featured presenter at the 15th Annual OHA symposium Thursday, March 21 in Tillsonburg.

F.A.R.M.S. President Ken Forth assured temporary foreign migrant worker cuts not related to agriculture



Ken Forth.

A Government of Canada press conference announcing downward adjustments in the nation's numbers of temporary foreign migrant workers certainly got Foreign Agricultural Resource Management Services (F.A.R.M.S.) president Ken Forth's attention.

Quickly, he fired off emails to three top bureaucrats.

"I got a phone call back in less than five minutes," said Forth, a conversation that essentially assured him cuts were not related to agricultural programs.

"I think we're OK for now," he said. "But only for now."

An Employment and Social Development news release dated March 21, 2024 indicated Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Official Languages, the Honourable Randy Boissonnault, had announced limited-time Temporary Foreign Workforce Solutions Road Map (WSRM) measures will not be renewed and additionally, end earlier than planned.

As of May 1, 2024, employers identified in the 2022 WSRM will have a reduction from 30 per cent to 20 per cent of their total workforce which can come in through the Temporary Foreign Worker Program under the low wage stream, with an exception for construction and health care sectors.

Employers will also be required to explore every option before applying for a New Labour Market Assessment (valid now for six rather than 12 months), including recruiting asylum seekers with valid Canadian work permits. The intent, says the release, is to ensure the program is used only in cases where no Canadian workers can fill necessary roles.

"Today, we announced our intention to reduce Canada's reliance on temporary foreign workers and encourage employers to find the talent they need right here, at home," said Minister Boissonnault. "The time-limited measures we introduced in 2022 were necessary as our labour market was facing unprecedented conditions – but now, as times change, we must ensure our Temporary Foreign Worker Program reflects our current needs."

The press release indicated job vacancies were at a record high of 983,600 in the second quarter of 2022, however fell to 678,500 in the fourth quarter of 2023.

"Our labour market needs are tightening, so should our policies," added The Honourable Marc Miller, Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, via the release. "Today's announcement prioritizes our country's needs to have enough construction workers to build houses, early childhood educators to

teach our kids, and health-care workers to treat patients. As we gradually reduce our reliance on temporary foreign workers, we will continue to help employers fill job vacancies while supporting Canadian workers."

Announced in 2022, the WSRM applied to the following seven sectors: food manufacturing, wood product manufacturing, furniture and related product manufacturing, accommodation and food services, construction, hospitals, and nursing and residential care facilities.

To reiterate, Forth was assured the cuts are not for agriculture. It would 'be nice' he continued if that was explicitly defined.

"I got a phone call back in less than five minutes," said Forth

"They don't, but our indication is it has nothing to do with us."

The F.A.R.M.S. president's long-term dealings with bureaucrats gives him confidence they are 'pretty straight up', although may be limited in how much they are able to communicate.

The March 21 press release did have two specific references to agriculture, firstly Budget

2022's commitment to developing a new foreign labour program ensuring access to a stable and reliable labour supply, while strengthening worker protections.

It also referenced a \$49.5-million Budget 2021 expenditure implementing a new Migrant Worker Support Program intended to better support worker needs.

Agriculture does employ many Canadians as well Forth continued, however there is an ongoing need for an influx of seasonal employees.

"We need an army of people to hand-harvest crops - that's the way it works."

Forth says roughly 60,000 of Canada's 240,000 temporary foreign workers are employed in agriculture and are integral to its successful operation.

"They are essential, it's over if they're not here." 🌱

The feeling is mutual.

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New mentorship opportunities for Canadian women in agriculture

Historically, agriculture in Canada has been a male-dominated industry, but women have always played very pivotal roles in farm businesses – just mostly behind the scenes or in a supportive rather than leading capacity.

This is now changing. Along with the general demographic shift in agriculture as older farmers are facing retirement and a new generation is taking over the management and ownership of farm businesses, there are also more women stepping into leadership roles in farms of all types and sizes.

I know first-hand that this is happening as I work with my father on our family farm near Green Valley in Eastern Ontario. As a Certified Crop Advisor, I also work as a crop input consultant with farmers in our area. But it's not just based on my own experiences.

The latest Canadian census numbers show that women represent a greater proportion of our farmers than in the past. About 30 per cent of Canada's farmers are women, and in 2021 we saw the first increase in the number of female farmers in Canada in 30 years.

According to Statistics Canada, this is due almost entirely to the fact that more women are now farming on their own. The numbers also illustrate that women are running larger farm businesses than in the past.

For young women in particular, it's not always easy to step into roles in this sector, whether it's part of a farm business or in a wide range of other jobs and careers, from agronomists and animal nutritionists to equipment operators and more.

Now there's a new agricultural mentorship program designed specifically for women that can help provide some additional support. Agri-Mentor offers individual, one-on-one mentorship coaching nationwide in English or French for women working in agriculture.

The program was first launched last year as a pilot project by the Agricultrices du Québec, Quebec's organization of farm women, through a program called Dimension E, which offers services to female entrepreneurs in the agriculture and forestry sectors. Funding for Dimension E is



provided by the federal government through Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada.

The success of the Quebec pilot, combined with the identified need across the agriculture sector for more training opportunities for women led to the expansion of the program Canada-wide and the launch of the for 2024.

It is led in Ontario by the Union des cultivateurs franco-ontariens (UCFO), with the support

of the Ontario Federation of Agriculture (OFA), where I serve as a member of the board of directors.

UCFO will match mentors and mentees who each must commit to at least one monthly meeting whether virtual or in-person for a period of six months. The program is open to Canadian women who are both looking for a mentor and those who wish to serve as one. It is free for mentees; an honorarium of \$500 is offered to women who serve as mentors.

Mentorship is about sharing experience and knowledge and having someone you can use as a sounding board when you are in need of advice or different perspectives. Being able to have some outside feedback is so beneficial both mentally and emotionally, especially when it is delivered in a constructive and thoughtful way.

Knowing you're not alone and being able to draw on the experiences of someone who has been in your shoes offers encouragement and empowerment. Having a mentor is also very motivating as it can help you increase your confidence in yourself, your business and your career.

Mentorship is something I couldn't access earlier in my career, and although I had colleagues in similar situations that I could lean on, we weren't able to give each other the type of guidance and insight a more experienced mentor can offer.

That's why I'm so passionate about this program and I would encourage any woman in agriculture to consider participating in this opportunity, whether as a mentee or someone who can fill that critical mentor role. 🌱

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AG EVENTS ON THE HORIZON

As the weather warms up and growing season starts, there will be more and more ag fun to be had.

Here are a few events coming up:

**SATURDAY, MAY 4
FROM 11 A.M. TO 5 P.M.**

BLOSSOMFEST IS BACK

A sure sign of spring at a popular Vineland farm, Blossomfest kicks off May at Cherrylane. It will feature music, food and drink and local artisans. Cherrylane is located at 4230 Victoria Ave. in Vineland.

**ORDER DEADLINE: MAY 4
ORDER PICK UP: MAY 17**

SOMETHING'S BREWING AT BENCH

A fundraiser partnership between Bench Brewing and the West Niagara Fair wraps up in early May. Beer lovers can support the fair while enjoying a cold one with orders of a great selection of beers from Bench. The deadline to place an order is May 5, with pickup occurring on May 17, just in time for the long weekend. For more details or to place an order, email [Renate McGillivray](mailto:RenateMcGillivray@gmail.com) at renatemcgillivray@gmail.com.

**SATURDAY, MAY 11
FROM 10 A.M. TO 4 P.M.**

NIAGARA FARM DAY RETURNS IN MAY

Take a break from spring planting and enjoy some fun at Niagara Farm Day. The annual event returns to Saturday, May 11 to the West Niagara Agricultural Centre. Running from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., it features a full day of activities for the whole family, all with an agricultural theme. There will be agricultural displays in addition to a mix of demonstrations on site. The ag centre is located at 7402 Mud St. West in Grassie. For more information call Maryanne Mous at 905-973-8728.

SUNDAY, MAY 12

SADDLE UP FOR ANOTHER YEAR OF THE SADDLE CLUB

The West Niagara Saddle Club's season kicks off with its first show on May 12 at the West Niagara Agricultural Centre. Shows will continue each month, with dates set for: May 12, June 16, July 21, Aug. 18 and Sept. 22. For more information on the club, visit its Facebook page, email Saddleclubwn@gmail.com or call 905-516-9923.

**LOCAL MARKETS START
SATURDAY, MAY 18**

MARKETS GET GOING

Several local farmers markets will be kicking off or celebrating the spring this month. **St. Catharines** has a special kickoff to its expanded market for the summer on May 18. On the same day down the road in **Niagara Falls**, that market will be celebrating the opening of its new location in The Exchange. The Thursday **Pelham** market starts the first Thursday of May. Later in the month the **Niagara-on-the-Lake** market will start May 25, while the **Grimsby** market starts on May 30.

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