

# Farm partnership supports local non-profit

## Omnivore Acres offers land and tools for food production

KATE AYERS

SAANICH – Omnivore Acres and the Shelbourne Community Kitchen in Saanich collaborate to provide quality and nutritious food for those in need. What started as a mutual appreciation for good food and community turned into an ongoing, mutually beneficial partnership.

“At least three or four years ago now, I became aware of Shelbourne Community Kitchen through an organization called 100+ Women Who Care,” says Catherine Gowan of Omnivore Acres in Saanich. “It’s a philanthropic group that meets three times a year and each person donates \$100 and different non-profits have the opportunity to present their case for funding.”

Shelbourne Community Kitchen attended a meeting to present its bid for community support.

Following the group’s presentation, Catherine’s husband Jim Gowan met with Shelbourne Community Kitchen Society program director Kim Cummins to learn more about the organization and meet the volunteers.

From there, Shelbourne Community Kitchen and Omnivore Acres began fostering a partnership.

“Every year we would have a surplus of eggs in January, plus peewee eggs,” says Catherine.

Upon the first donation of

eggs, the organization’s model and vision resonated with the Gowans.

“We did a donation to them and then we started developing a relationship with them,” says Catherine. “Another year went by, and we donated more eggs. They became our go-to donation place.”

Shelbourne Community Kitchen has been operational since March 2015. It is the result of five founding partner organizations that came together in 2012 to address growing poverty in their neighbourhoods.

“Each was doing something on their own to support the community. They decided to combine their efforts,” explains Cummins. “The community kitchen model is something they formed to create a space where they could build community through healthy food.”

The kitchen offers cooking, garden and pantry programs.

“Our services really work for folks who have a variety of dietary restrictions. It’s very accommodating because it’s a self-select model,” says Cummins. “About three weeks into the pandemic, we started a no-contact home delivery service, recognizing that quite a number of our folks are immunocompromised or have mobility barriers. We wanted to make sure we could get healthy food right to the people who need it most.”

The approach saw numbers triple in the first year



Katie Bodin is one of several volunteers that help Shelbourne Community Kitchen grow their own food and keep Omnivore Acres operating, too. SUBMITTED

of the pandemic, and they continue to climb two years later.

Last year, as part of its strategic plan, Shelbourne Community Kitchen partnered with farms to grow more of its own food locally. The kitchen approached Omnivore Acres with the idea of volunteers coming to the

farm to tend to and grow crops.

“We’ve had a really successful CSA box program here for about 10 years, but we were having trouble getting labour to carry that on and we were getting too old to want to keep doing it,” says Catherine.

With the Gowans ready to

embark on a new chapter in their lives, a new season of growth with Shelbourne Community Kitchen began.

“The more we talked to Bruce and the more we got to know Kim, and the more we looked at ourselves and wondered what we were

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# VOLUNTEERS keep farm growing

from page 39

going to do with our property, it made all kinds of sense. That's how it got started," says Jim.

Last year was the partners' first working season and the group harvested about 8,040 pounds of vegetables from Omnivore Acres. The Gowans also donated 500 dozen eggs.

"We have a 1,200-square-foot greenhouse, we have all the infrastructure for water, tools, and we had a lot of rhubarb and asparagus and raised beds that were not going to be used," Jim says. "And we have 399 laying chickens on a small-lot permit with the [BC] Egg Marketing Board so we have access to composted chicken manure. They took the garden over and it just took off."

Omnivore Acres and Shelbourne Community Kitchen are continuing the collaboration this year.

"It's a win-win, and if I look at it objectively, for a non-profit or infrastructure trying to transition because of age, such as Catherine and I, it's a really, really good model. It's worked well for everybody," says Jim.

Volunteers are respectful, appreciative and hard-working, which keeps Omnivore Acres cared for and productive.

"When a farm isn't working, it's kind of depressing, to be honest. You see the weeds and you can't do the work and you feel like it's a terrible waste of an asset," says Catherine. "So just having that energy around us is really pleasant. I can't imagine us not doing it now."

The kitchen's use of local expertise



Volunteer Val Connacher helps prep produce for Shelbourne Community Kitchen. SUBMITTED

and resources helps ensure families in the area have a secured access to fresh and nutritious food.

"It's a beautiful partnership where I

think there is a mutual passion for community building, healthy food, gardening and farming, of course," Cummins says.

In addition to Omnivore Acres, Shelbourne Community Kitchen works with several organizations in Victoria.

Working with Top Soil Urban Agriculture, the kitchen established a 250-pot container garden that offers space for workshops and hands-on skills training. With LifeCycles Project Society, it runs a team that picks fruit in the local community. The fruit goes into the kitchen's pantry program.

Then there's Get Growing, Victoria. They use nurseries throughout Victoria to grow easy-to-grow food plants and distribute plant starts to a number of organizations like ours to support marginalized communities growing food at home," says Cummins.

Overall, sourcing local food from local producers benefits entire communities.

"It's really about recognizing that non-profits have the opportunity to leverage their purchasing power and their programs to be able to promote sustainability. ... Investing in food growing initiatives is a really incredible way where not only are you reducing your food costs as a food distribution organization, you're also able to offer and supply the best food that you can," says Cummins. "We recognize that investing in our local farmers and food producers is a way as a non-profit we can not only offer the best produce or the best food that we can to our members, but we're also supporting a more just and sustainable food system in a different way."

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