

# Home-grown food becomes vital concern as global

**FARMING** | Advocates for buying and growing local say imported foods we take for granted have lulled us into a false sense of security

BY LARRY PYNN  
VANCOUVER SUN

Kiwi fruit from Chile, pineapples from Costa Rica, strawberries and oranges from California, watermelons and grapes from California, pears and garlic from China, bananas from Ecuador, apples from New Zealand, coconuts from the Dominican Republic.

The list of exotic foods available at local grocery stores this time of year reflects an affluent society with the luxury of picking and choosing what it wants from the fields and plantations of nations around the world.

But there are growing concerns that the imported foods we take for granted are lulled us into a false sense of security, raising concerns that we must do more to become self-sufficient and not rely on imports shipped from vast distances at increasing economic and environmental cost.

"We're quite used to having food that comes from a distance," confirms Deborah Kahn, food policy coordinator in the City of Vancouver's social planning department.

"We have to re-examine the food we eat. Do we need to have all these foods in our stores at any time, go into a supermarket and know we'll get pineapples

just because we want one, or do we treat it more as an exotic fruit like it used to be because of the distance it travelled to get here?"

"The more we rely upon and support the foods coming from farther away, we lose our own local producers because we're not supporting them. If something does happen in California, where do we turn for food?"

War, drought, water shortages, falling fish stocks, rising populations, climate change, loss of farmland to development, increasing fuel prices — all are reasons why Canadians should be wary about relying on other nations for food over the long term.

In a letter to the United Nations in May, Canada's National Farmers Union noted that over the past six years global grain supplies had been drawn down to a 69-day supply from a 116-day supply.

"It is almost certain that the current decline in global food supplies is steeper than at any time since the Second World War," said union president Stewart Wells. At the same time, he said, more pesticides and fertilizers are pushing the land to the limit.

"Global food security is rapidly eroding," he concluded, calling for a world summit on the issue.



GLENN BAGLO/VANCOUVER SUN

The drive for food security includes community gardens like this one in Kerrisdale that help meet the food needs of individuals.

Food security includes everything from encouraging private or community gardens that meet the food needs of individuals or families to supporting local farmers through farmland preserva-

tion and a buy-local mentality. The 12,000-member B.C. Agriculture Council has already urged the province to adopt a set of agricultural policies that provide for food security. "It's an

area people are taking a lot more interest in," says Steve Thomson, the council's executive-director. The B.C. government, under increasing criticism for allowing good farmland to be released

from the Agricultural Land Reserve for urban and industrial development, is currently looking at the issue of food security.

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## Despite food bank's success, 'thousands' still go hungry

On one hand, Vancouver's award-winning Quest Outreach Society is a runaway success, collecting \$7 million worth of excess food each year from local businesses and redistributing it to people in need.

On the other, the society's operation underscores just how much more needs to be done.

"That's the scary part," executive director Shelley Wells explains. "There are thousands of people going hungry every day. We're always operating at maximum capacity, given our limited resources. We're currently picking up less than one per cent of the food available to us. And the quality? You'd be blown away."

Wells would like to triple the society's leased warehouse space, currently at 6,500 square feet, and thereby increase its capacity to collect and redistribute food. The society is on a short list for Vancity's \$1 million award, money that could be used for expansion.

The society employs a staff of 10, four of them truck drivers, on a \$600,000 operating budget. It also gets help from companies such as the Great Little Box Company, which often picks up food for the society if it's in the right



BILL KEAY/VANCOUVER SUN FILES

Shelley Wells, executive director of Quest Outreach Society, would like to triple the size of her Vancouver warehouse.

area, she said.

Founded 15 years ago, Quest Outreach Society today collects raw food from 235 food suppliers. Eighty social service agency partners in the Greater Vancouver Regional District help redistribute that food to 50,000 people each month, via inner-city schools, hospices, senior centres, mental health operations, women's recovery centres and food banks.

Food suppliers — be they wholesalers, retailers, airlines or freight companies — contact the society when they have surplus food that might be blemished, mislabelled, or freight damaged, but otherwise safe to eat.

Some companies prefer to give food away rather than lower their prices, meaning the society could wind up with top sirloin steak. On other occasions, if a pop bottle explodes, the company prefers to give away the entire skid than clean it up.

In return, the donor companies receive tax-deductible receipts, and the good feeling attached to feeding needy individuals and not having to pay to dispose of excess food.

Raw products might keep for three or four days after they are donated, while canned or frozen foods can last months. Food that cannot be consumed is shipped to livestock farms or sent to the University of B.C., where it is composed and reapplied on campus grounds.

The society survives on private donations and money received from its social service agency partners, who get their food at five to 10 cents on the dollar, Wells said.

Food Runners, operated by the Greater Vancouver Food Bank Society, also accepts prepared food from hotels, restaurants, cafeterias and schools for redistribution to agencies that provide hot meals to needy individuals.

Food Runners' 230,000 kilograms of food collected annually represents 1.25 million meals.

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