



Business

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Home sales, prices ease

There were 661 residential homes sold through the MLS system of the Kitchener-Waterloo Association of Realtors in May, a decrease of 22.7% compared to the same month last year. The average sale price for all residential properties was \$875,194, an 18.3% increase over May 2021 and a 3.5% lower than in April. The average price of a detached home was \$1,016,834, down 4.2% from April.

Foodgrains auction

Last year it was the kitchen sink, this year it's an unused low flush toilet. Such is the variety of items available at the Ontario online auction for Canadian Foodgrains Bank spearheaded by the local Bighead River Foodgrains Project. The auction is live today (June 9) and runs through June 15.

www.sydenhamauction.com

Business is blooming for local producers

Growing flowers has become something of a cottage industry, with room to scale up for those willing to do the work

Leah Gerber

Observer Staff

HAYLEY VISENTIN IS A NEW mom, new to Elmira and a new flower farmer. She just had her first harvest of tulips. She's planned to grow daffodils, ranunculus, anemones, snapdragon stalks, sunflowers, celosia, chocolate lace, pin cushions, among others.

While she now runs her own flower-growing operation, Blue Arbor Farm, she didn't start out in horticulture.

"I was in process excellence in manufacturing," she said.

She and her husband were stuck in their Kitchener apartment during the pandemic, and they didn't have any green space of their own. They would spend time in the country to get away from the city. "The more we spent time up north, the more we wanted land for ourselves," she explained.

She also realized she was unhappy with her job, so she quit and started a master's degree in sustainability with University of Harvard extension. In her courses, she loved being with likeminded people, but wasn't drawn to the life of a traditional organic farmer. Then she was introduced to growing flowers, and is learning how to do it as she goes with an online course.

Now she is basing her



Hayley Visentin and Janette Drost are among those who've started a flower-growing operation.



Leah Gerber

master's degree around the local flower farming industry including barriers to getting started, and the way the growers and florists help each other.

Visentin isn't the only one interested in flower farming, of course.

In recent years, more and more floral farmers are popping up, says Tina Sharpe, a florist who owns and operates Living Fresh, a shop that sells home goods and flowers in St. Jacobs. She has operated her own floral retail shop for the past 10 years.

"The local flower farm movement, I would say it started maybe six years ago to become very, very

popular," she said. "I have always in the past eight-ish years worked with local flower farms. Depending on what they grow and what they have available, I buy from different ones.

"Some are new like Hayley, but there are some that have been around for several years now, and there's a shift toward local. It's not 100 per cent sustainable to only buy local, but we definitely try as much as possible," she said.

Janette Drost is another floral farmer in the area. She runs Four Boys Flower Farm in Elora. This is her fourth year farming

flowers, though since she is in the process of moving from Elora to West Montrose, she is scaling back this year and referring customers to other local farmers. She knows of eight to 10 floral farmers who are just starting out or working at a medium scale in the Wellington and Waterloo area alone. The community is growing and connecting primarily through Instagram, she said.

According to the Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario, the market for field-grown cut flowers in Ontario is estimated at \$6 million, and growing.

The flower industry as a whole is blossoming in Ontario. According to the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, the greenhouse flower sector, or more mainstream sector, which includes flowering potted plants, cut flowers and ornamental and vegetable bedding plants or spring container gardens, is now the third largest agricultural sector in the province behind dairy and swine.

The main way new field-grown flower farmers are getting their products to market are through co-op structures, farmers' markets, subscrip-

tions, pick-your-own and agro-tourism and offering wedding services.

Though the industry seems to be budding right now, Sharpe says she's not sure how many of these new floral farmers will last.

"It's hard work. Everything about floristry is hard work, right from growing the flowers to delivering them to the end customer. Social media has glorified our jobs and made it so beautiful and pretty but nobody realizes the sweat, tears, and back-breaking work that goes into what we do for a living. So I think some people are jumping into the industry going, 'oh my God I totally love flowers, I can do this,' not realizing that you have to weed, you are constantly in the sun, you're in the middle of the summer sweating your butt off," she said.

Drost agrees. "It's really hard work. It's so manual," she said. "I think a lot of flower farmers get into it and realize, 'you know what, I'd actually rather be a gardener, not a flower farmer,' because it is so much work. That has been my main challenge: the time, especially having young kids. And most of the other flower farmers I know are also either working full-time, or have kids or whatever. That is really hard, because in order to be profitable selling by the

→ FLOWER POWER 12

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Woolwich Community Health Centre

Farmers will need to protect their own land from development

Last week's provincial election will be remembered as a vote for highway development... but not the kind that helps open up rural Ontario to the rest of the province.

Urban Ontario, particularly the 905 area, doesn't like being stuck in gridlock. And it has a huge number of votes.

To woo that electorate, the Progressive Conservatives proposed a 59-kilometre, \$6-billion highway that would cut across the northwest part of the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), mainly serving Mississauga, Brampton and Milton.

I got lost in Milton Tuesday. The new hous-



OWEN ROBERTS
Food For Thought

ing there is unreal. I can only imagine the challenges faced by anyone west of Toronto trying to go north or east on a regular basis.

Doug Ford counted on that frustration driving votes. And he, or his advisors, were right.

Now the premier and his to-be-named agriculture, food and rural affairs minister will need to spin the highway as something good for farmers throughout the rest of the province.

I imagine they will

say something like the highway it will more efficiently help get the food produced by "hard working regular folks in our beautiful rural areas" into the grocery carts of those in the highly populated 905.

After all, what else can they say?

The Greens, the Liberals and the New Democrats all opposed the highway, as did many environmental groups. Among them, they said it was in the wrong place, it was an idea from the 1950s before public transit was on people's radar, and it was likely to put more vehicles on the road and increase pollution from exhaust.

Farm groups expressed some concern about farmland being lost because of the proposed highway. But they typically support the Progressive Conservatives. Even though farmland will be lost, they didn't say much.

To its credit, the Ontario Federation of Agriculture said an agricultural assessment of the project should be conducted. That's responsible. But the kind of passionate outcry that's normally heard when farmland is threatened was lacking.

It's difficult to believe that an agricultural assessment will change the Ford government's plans. Nor will it evoke

much response from farm groups. Environmental groups, yes, who put stock in the Greenbelt. But not farm groups. Politically, there's too much at stake to oppose the biggest election promise of the party they support.

And when it comes to picking battles, this one is really a sad case. The motivation to push back is dampened by the fact that development is taking precedent to farmland preservation all over the GTA.

A farmer with the Peel Federation of Agriculture who lives outside the Greenbelt told Better Farming magazine that he and others there have

been in a holding pattern for 14 years, as development policies ping-ponged back and forth.

They've been reluctant to make new investments in their farm because their future is uncertain. And as for their kids coming back to the farm... well, why would they, given the pro-development culture they're facing?

I think farmers can count on the Ford government for investment. It's been good at giving them resources for research, in particular.

But if it comes down to either protecting farmland or attracting votes by developing highways, the writing's on the wall.

FLOWER POWER: The product may be lovely, but there's plenty of hard work to be done in order to make a go of it

→FROM 11

stem, you really have to scale up."

"We have a lot of little flower farms, but as to whether that is sustainable for everybody to keep on going and build them all, I don't know," she added.

"Weather patterns are also definitely a challenge. Going from extreme cold to extreme heat so quickly is very hard. And then we had drought the last couple weeks. Those kinds of things are really difficult emotionally, mentally. Blood sweat and tears, literally.

"The demand is not the problem, there's definitely demand. The collaboration's not the problem either: great collaboration.

It is just the challenge of how do you scale up without totally burning yourself out?"

The increase in Ontario's local floral farmers has coincided with an increase in demand for local product. Sharpe says when the pandemic hit, it caused major disruptions to the flower industry, and she and other florists were forced to look closer to home.

"We are still dealing with repercussions," she said.

Drost says over the last year she would regularly receive desperate messages from florists. "That kind of stuff was constant," she said. "Like, 'S.O.S. Do you have anything in blush and

white?'"

The benefit of farming flowers is that with careful planning, a lot of flowers can be grown on a relatively small piece of land. Drost began selling to florists with three rows of flowers. From there, she moved up to an acre of production on land she rented from family. Drost estimates she sold about 100,000 stems last year, and sold to 40 to 50 different florists.

Sharpe says she has made an effort to source local flowers for at least eight of her 10 years owning a floral retail shop, because she cares about the environmental impact of conventional cut flowers.

"The floral industry has always been very sneaky about where things come from," said Sharpe.

"Some flowers have a very high carbon footprint because of how they are transported to us, also in South America and other parts of the world they are using pesticides and chemicals that are banned in Canada so we are also having to make sure we are buying from growers who are paying their labourers well and that they're not using harsh chemicals that are causing birth defects, and all that kind of stuff."

Most of the world's cut flowers come from the Netherlands, South America and Africa. This means they travel thousands of kilometers to reach a customer in Canada.

According to the Observatory of Economic Complexity, Canada was the world's 11th highest importer of flowers in 2020, having imported US\$94.2 million worth of

cut flowers.

Visentin and Drost see flower growing as an opportunity to restore the planet by improving soil health, practicing no-till farming and protecting from erosion.

"I started flower farming because they were beautiful. But it's progressed every year. It's like peeling back the layers of the onion more and more to 'why are we doing this?'" said Drost. "The more I do it, the more I realize how amazing nature is, and how understanding it, and actually working with it, hands in the soil, it's been so grounding."

That said, Sharpe says local flowers can only go so far.

"I'm a designer, I understand the impacts of the floral industry on the environment, so I want to support local as much as I possibly can. However, things like our roses are predominantly only grown in South America, and if you need roses, there's very limited pickings for local. Same with carnations. You're not going to get a local carnation, nobody grows them."

"The (local) flower farmers only have stock available from June until October, so, from frost till frost, and we need flowers 365 days a year."

The exception is the more established flower farming operations equipped with greenhouses in places like Niagara, she said.

Drost suggests getting around this might require

some re-thinking about winter florals, saying there is a plenty of colour and texture in the local winter greenery and branches.

The local flower industry is still new, and many farmers are learning the best techniques to deliver the best products. Even though it's not hard to find fresh-cut flowers at a stand on the side of the road

"The product's fresher because it's not been shipped in a box in some kind of refrigeration, which again, carbon footprint. It's local, fresh, cut the day before, in my cooler the next day or the morning of," she said.

In her research, Visentin outlines how besides the learning curve, the other main barrier faced by those in the local flower industry is access to land, as well as the pricing disadvantage of operating at a smaller scale.

Visentin and her husband recently purchased land in Creemore with more space for growing flowers, and will be moving there mid-summer. For now, she is growing on land in Fergus.

She envisions establishing a cooperative for local small-scale floral growers so they can more reliably produce the volume and quality needed by florists. In the meantime, she says customers should ask their florists for local flowers to communicate demand.

"Support your local flower farmers and look for them, because they exist," said Visentin. "All of these people are here because they want to be part of the local movement, but also the climate change movement and taking care of the earth in a different way. And they just want to make people happy. People who grow flowers, they love flowers, they love people, they just want to spread that joy and love through a bouquet."



almost anywhere in the townships, professional florists need high quality flowers that have been cut at exactly the right time and conditioned to last as long as possible, said Sharpe.

While the established growers and suppliers from Niagara area or international suppliers can reliably supply flowers with maximum longevity, new local farmers are experiencing a learning curve. They need to learn how to condition the flowers, and the best time to cut them, store and transport them among other needs.

Even if quality is still growing, Sharpe admits local flowers have more pop.

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