

Eat Your Veggies

“Good food” boxes deliver local fresh produce to churches

by Noelle Boughton

“This is a great way to get people to eat more fruit and vegetables,” says Susannah Roth, who has set up a Food Share drop at Manor Road United Church in Toronto. “Our family is eating far more vegetables than we did before the program.”

One of the aims of Toronto’s Food Share program is to enable fresh produce to reach more people at affordable prices. The program began in 1985 when the Rev. Stuart Cole, a United Church minister in the downtown region of Regent Park, approached the City of Toronto to help address the problem of hunger. Food Share’s Executive Director, Debbie Field, notes the program was originally established to provide fresh produce to people on low or fixed incomes, but now people of all income levels support and use it.

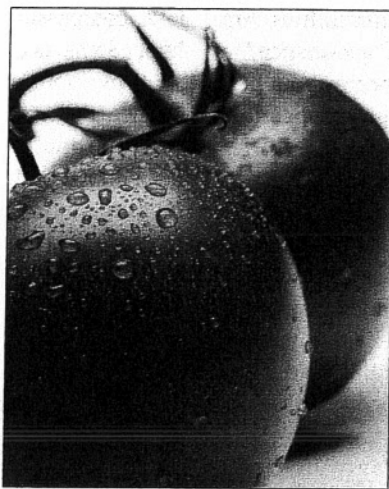
Customers choose from six types of boxes ranging from \$12 for a small box of pre-cut produce to \$32 for a large box of organically grown produce. Local farmers supply seasonal produce, which is supplemented in winter with food from the Ontario Food Terminal.

When Roth discovered Food Share’s affordable, flavourful food, she suggested her church become a drop site. She takes orders, collects money, and asks the secretary or volunteers to oversee bi-monthly drops for their 26 church and community customers. “It seems a little daunting,” she says. “But once you figure out the system, it’s easy to do.”

Roth also likes the fact that Food Share gives one large box to donate for every 10 boxes ordered. Manor Road United sometimes gives its free box to the local Out of the Cold program, or offers it to church members.

“For us it’s both an economical and more environmentally friendly way to eat,” says Roth. “We’ve also found that it’s a lot cheaper than buying in the grocery store.”

Toronto’s Food Share has a \$5 million budget and 50 staff, and provides more than 4,000 “good food” boxes per month to 200 neighbourhood drops. It works with many community agencies to sponsor the Toronto Partners for Student Nutrition, which supports over 300 student nutrition programs. It has community gardens and kitchens



with programs teaching people basic food skills. Food Share also advocates for better food policies because, says Field, “we need to create a new system.”

There are similar programs across Canada in rural and urban areas. The Halton Fresh Food Box is a four-year-old program that operates out of St. Christopher’s Anglican Church in Burlington, Ontario. Jeanne Bullock, its interim program coordinator, reports that it delivers about 700 \$12 and \$15 boxes once a month and is exploring how to expand its capacity.

Bev Whatmough is the Halton Fresh Food Box’s drop site coordinator at St. Andrew’s United Church in Georgetown, Ontario. She coordinates 70 orders a month—about one-quarter of which come from church members. She encourages seniors and singles to share small boxes and notes that the church and local food bank subsidize boxes for others.

Whatmough is part of a team of six that helps at St. Andrew’s during the pick-up afternoon. “It’s a lot of fun,” she says. She also sees the program’s benefits.

“The major one is the health issue,” says Whatmough. “We’re finding that when people run out of fruit and vegetables during the month, they end up buying more because they like the taste.”

The other aim of the program is to enable people to shop locally, where possible, and support local farmers. “It’s important they use local farmers’ produce,” adds Whatmough, “because I’m convinced that if we don’t stop paving all our farms, we will have to import all of our food.”

For those interested in such a program, she recommends that “if someone offers this to you, just do it.” Assume it will start slow and pick up, she adds, although her customer base doubled each of the first two months it was offered.

Whatmough also chuckles about how much people enjoy seeing what they get in their box each month. “People say it’s like Christmas to come and look in their box,” she says, “because what they get changes through the seasons.”

—Noelle Boughton is a Toronto writer and managing editor of *Mandate*.