

Hannah Swan, left, and Cheyanne Kravontka, Grade 3 students at Rutland Elementary School in Kelowna, weed their garden plot near the school. Rutland Elementary and the Central Okanagan school district have plots to teach children basic gardening skills so they can grow their own food.

# Eat, drink and be wary

■ **Various groups in Okanagan working to ensure reliability of food supply in face of global concerns**

By **SUSAN McIVER**  
Special to The Okanagan Saturday

**I**f you're not worrying about how safe your food is, perhaps you should be. "Food security is on the radar everywhere," said Wendy Aasen, a longtime advocate of food security in Vernon.

Frequent reports about the potentially catastrophic effects of global warming, scarcity of water and soil, and depletion of fossil-fuel reserves have many people wondering about the reliability of their food supply.

Even if these calamities prove to be less severe than predicted, it is still important to take steps to ensure that a nutritious dinner is going to be on the table tonight, tomorrow and for all the tomorrows to come.

"Communities are food secure when all persons obtain a nutritionally adequate, culturally acceptable diet from local food sources," longtime organic grower Lee McFadyen recently told the Food Security Advisory Committee for the South Okanagan and Similkameen.

The committee grew out of a community food security forum in November in Penticton to discuss food-related issues.

"The next step is to do an inventory of food needs and resources," said



SUSAN McIVER/Special to The Okanagan Saturday

While most of us depend on the supermarket shelves for our food, Susan McCardell of Penticton grows a wide variety of foods on her city lot. She and her husband, Hugh, enjoy nutritious meals year-round from the fruits and vegetables Susan cans and freezes.

committee chairman Thomas Tumbach.

Vernon has already completed an assessment and action plan, and is implementing recommendations.

Long-term goals are to increase production, accessibility and knowledge, and to develop policies at all levels of government to ensure an adequate supply.

Economic prosperity is crucial because access to nutritious food — a cornerstone of good health — is directly linked to income level.

A recent report based on a B.C.-wide food pricing survey concluded that welfare recipients and the working poor don't have enough money to buy the basic foods everyone needs to remain healthy.

The province's top health officer, Dr. Perry Kendall, says making it easier for people to eat right would put a significant dent in the prevalence of illnesses responsible for much of the health-care budget, such as cardiovascular disease, cancer and diabetes.

Last month, the Public Health Agency of Canada awarded a \$99,428 grant to the Interior Health Authority to fund community-based diabetes-prevention initiatives.

A heightened emphasis on growing and eating local food would help, according to Rene Nyberg-Smith, co-ordinator of the North Okanagan food security project.

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# FOOD

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This summer, the province is setting up a program to provide coupons to low-income individuals to buy fresh produce at farmers' markets. Cities and towns across the country are developing food action plans and food charters that set out policies, strategies and recommendations for achieving a fair and sustainable food supply.

"In five years, I'd like to see local councils have policies in place around land use, neighbourhood design and collaboration among all parts of the food system," said food and health project leader Cathryn Welner of Interior Health. Kelowna and Penticton have already adopted plans that promote and support agriculture.

Other communities, such as Summerland, are working on plans.

"Food security and land are inextricably linked," said McFadyen, who explained the land base may range in size from backyard gardens and community garden plots to large farms. "The high cost of land in the Okanagan is preventing many aspiring farmers from fulfilling their dreams."

"The opportunity to make large amounts of money from the sale of their property coupled with increasing cost of production and decreasing profit margins are strong incentives for farmers to sell their land. "My kids are getting the same price for squash I got 10 years ago, while every aspect of the cost of production has increased. I'm suggesting they sell and do something else."

Pressure on farmers to sell food cheaply is counter-productive, according to Welner. "If we want good food, we need to pay for it."

Although still in the agricultural land reserve, land sold by farmers is often used for purposes other than producing food, such as vineyards and pasture for horses.

A land trust system that allows land to be kept for farming on a lease or rent basis would help diminish the loss of agricultural land to non-food production.

Food production for families can be on a small scale. High and Susan McCarrall of Penticton grow a variety of foods on their city lot. They also catch fish off Vancouver Island, which Susan eats and freezes along with their fruit and vegetables.

A typical dinner at the McCarralls house is salmon pie, mashed potatoes with chili sauce and vegetables—all from their stock of preserved foods.

High remembers going hungry as a child in Vancouver during the Depression of the 1930s, said Susan.

## FOOD FACTS

Currently, B.C. farmers produce 48 per cent of all foods consumed in British Columbia and 56 per cent of foods grown in the province. To maintain the current level of self-reliance to the year 2025, farmers will have to:

- Increase production by 30 per cent over 2001 levels.
- Have access to 49 per cent more irrigated land than in 2005, irrigated lands typically near expanding urban centres.

— B.C.'s Food Self-Reliance, *B.C. Ministry of Agriculture and Lands, 2007*

locations in Kelowna and one in Lake Country.

Anna Shepel and Milena Curnil, both lifelong gardeners and how-to dwellers, have plots at the Barice Road garden.

"My adult son also has his own plot. He's very health-conscious and likes simple, natural food," Curnil said.

"Two more gardens are starting this summer, which will bring the total number of plots to over 200," said society president Ruth Melior. The former head of food services at Kelowna General Hospital, Melior has a keen interest in gardening, and is concerned about people's nutrition and access to food.

Nutrition and accessibility are the main food security issues in the Okanagan, according to Tunbach. Although people may understand the importance of good nutrition, they can have difficulties sifting through the plethora of current information.

"They can be bamboozled — nutrition labelling, a constant stream of media reports, what does it all mean?" said Princeton public health nurse Beatrice Bibby, who works with young families.

Not knowing how to grow food, prepare it and preserve it is another area of concern.

Skills that were once traditionally taught at home are often not being passed to the next generation. — mothers work full time, grandmothers play golf, and introverting a dinner of processed food is quick and convenient.

The often overlapping issues of nutrition, accessibility and knowledge are being tackled in a variety of ways. "I use these to show schoolchildren how much sugar they consume in a year," said community nutritionist Kristi Besegeard, pointing to two large bags of white sugar in a bin under her desk.

Some schools have nutrition programs that encourage students to eat a balanced diet with emphasis on fresh fruit and vegetables. Nutland Elementary and the Central Okanagan school district

Vernon. The more than 100 annual participants include singles and people with families.

"They're not necessarily on social assistance. Everyone wants to learn how to stretch food dollars," Assen said.

Elisben Oliver-Bauer of the Lower Similkameen Community Services Society leads a Healthy Eating for the Family program in Keremeos.

"We cover the basics — good eating habits, food preparation, cleanliness and how to follow recipes," she said. "If someone is interested in cooking, we'll do that, too."

Food banks and other charitable food outlets provide food for people facing economic difficulties.

Fewer people are visiting the Summerland food bank today than a few years ago, according to volunteer Leventine Adams, who attributes the change to the robust Okanagan economy.

Adams stresses the importance of "protecting farmers" — not just from big corporations, but not our farmers," she said.

"The astonishing success of farmers' markets clearly shows how much people value fresh, healthy food and the local growers who produce it."

"I come for the fresh local produce," said Sheila O'Reilly, a frequent customer at the Kelowna Farmers and Crafters Market.

Starting in 1995 with four vendors, the Kelowna market has grown to 165 vendors who attract thousands of customers each week in high season. "Traditional roadside stands continue to be good sources of local fruits and vegetables."

Taste is another reason for the popularity of locally grown food.

"Store-bought tomatoes are bred for transport, not taste. They're six to eight weeks off the vine, gas-pumped and transported up to thousands of miles," said Naramata tomato grower James Young.

Lack of taste isn't the only negative aspect of consuming food grown far away.

There is also loss of nutritional value as the product ages, along with all the problems associated with fossil-fuel consumption needed to transport it to market.

During a visit to the Ukraine, Adams saw firsthand what can happen when the oil supply is compromised.

"I saw rows of women working the hillsides with hoes because there wasn't any fuel for the machinery after the Russians pulled out," she said.

Welner suggests that an anticipated shortage of truck drivers may be the first factor to limit long-distance transport on this continent.

Food produced in some countries does not meet North American standards for consumption.

In April, 107 food imports from China were detained in U.S. ports for safety reasons. They included mushrooms laced with illegal pesticides,