

Tough economy, food safety have more Canadians planting vegetable gardens

Written by John Lewandowski, THE CANADIAN PRESS

HALIFAX, N.S. - Maybe it's a growing environmental awareness. Perhaps it's concern about food safety or just the reality of hard economic times.

But if traffic at local garden centres is any indication this summer, more Canadians are getting into homegrown vegetables.

"We've certainly seen a trend upwards this year in terms of vegetables. More people want to know where their food is coming from," says Tim Tregunno, owner of the Halifax Seed Co., founded in 1866 and the oldest company of its kind in the country.

Tregunno says economic trends are also a large factor and he's seen this cycle before.

"When the economy gets tough, people say, 'Geez, I've got a patch out there. I can plant some tomatoes or beans and grow a little bit of my own food.'"

There was a time a generation or two ago when it seemed everyone had a backyard garden, a practice that pretty much disappeared with the onset of big-box stores and year-round availability of imported produce.

Tregunno says he's seen a lot of young people of late who are trying to get back to the concept of Grandma's garden.

Some come clued in, others not so much.

"You get some people coming in and they have 20 or 30 packs of seeds and you say, 'How big's your garden?'" says Tregunno, who sees part of his role as helping educate newcomers to the gardening world.

"When they tell me it's six feet by 12 feet, I say, 'OK, let's just back up the boat. You've got way too much stuff here, including stuff you should have started three months ago.'"

At Richmond Nursery just south of Ottawa, head grower Peggy Adams has been watching a similar trend develop in recent years as younger customers come through the door.

"Heirloom tomatoes definitely, we're seeing demand for squash, which we haven't had in years, cucumbers and celery and broccoli's a big one," she says.

"It's also nice to see young parents coming in and their kids picking up herbs and even knowing what to do with them."

Adams says the demand for fresh herbs has really jumped this summer while the increase in the number of customers wanting vegetables started building a couple of years ago.

She says people are rediscovering the fact that there's just so much more taste in things that come fresh from the garden.

No surprise to Shaun Zwarun, executive chef at the DesBarres Manor Inn in Guysborough, N.S., who won the 2008 Cuisine of the Year prize at the Taste of Nova Scotia Prestige Awards.

Most of the herbs and vegetables that make it onto his award-winning plates are taken from an organic garden just metres from the kitchen door.

He started it five years ago, partly out of necessity.

"We're kind of off the path here as far as deliveries go, so it's great. I can walk out the back door and get what I need," says Zwarun of the more than 30 herbs and edible flowers he grows in his garden alongside heirloom tomatoes and squash.

Those herbs and vegetables in season inform a creative, contemporary East Coast Canadian menu which changes almost daily.

"You'll never get anything this fresh if you have to depend on suppliers. Who knows how long it's been sitting in the warehouse?" he says.

Zwarun says the bounty he harvests from his own garden always complements local product like the seafood and chanterelle mushrooms that regularly find their way onto his table.

"I just picked up some local pork and I'm going to do a blueberry and lemon balm relish for tonight," he says after a few minutes of inspiration in his garden.