



Gyungbo Noh says the Bethany New Growers program gave him a chance to hone his farm management skills, while gaining a foothold in the local agriculture community. He and his wife Kendra MacEachern now run their own operation, Homi Garden, just outside Antigonish. (Sister Florence Kennedy photo)

Agricultural calling

Antigonish nuns give aspiring farmers a chance to grow

by Rose Murphy

Two nuns in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, have brought their congregation's beautiful farmland and historic barn back into use, by running an incubator program for aspiring market gardeners.

The New Growers project is intended to "teach younger people the skills of how you interact with the earth in a way that it produces, but at the same time you enhance the soil," says Sister Donna Brady, who is a member of the Sisters of St. Martha. It's all part of their commitment to social justice, being good stewards of the land, and sharing their resources with the wider community.

This order, commonly known as

the Marthas, has never sheltered in the cloister. They were founded in 1900 to work in domestic service at St. Francis Xavier University, but soon went on to establish additional ministries in health care, education, social work, and pastoral care, which took them across the country and as far as the West Indies. For the past 121 years, service and hospitality have remained their core values.

"One of the things about hospitality in our values is a care for the earth," says Sister Florence Kennedy, who worked with Sister Donna to establish the New Growers program in 2013.

Sugarloaf Mountain rises behind the large barn and rolling fields at the site of

the Marthas' original working farm. It was started in 1922, just a year after the nuns moved from the university campus to their own motherhouse, called Bethany Run by the sisters, with the help of three local men, the operation raised chickens and a few cows to help offset the cost of feeding the congregation. According to Sister Donna, the nuns were known for applying scrupulous housekeeping standards on the farm. "It was probably the most sparkling barn in all the world," she says with a laugh.

In the 1940s and '50s, the Marthas expanded their agricultural endeavours. They started producing vegetables, meats and dairy products – supplying other

institutions they operated, including the local hospital, the women's college, and convents in St. Andrews and Canso. They even supplied local grocers.

"There was always a connection with the earth and with the soil," Sister Florence says. In fact, the members of this order identify themselves as "earthy women."

In the mid- to late '50s, more than 100 Dutch families immigrated to the Antigonish area, and the Marthas sponsored several of them, guaranteeing work on the farm, which helped them get into the country and gave them a taste of farming in a different climate and culture. The New Growers program continues that tradition of "offering opportunity for people to establish themselves on the land," says Sister Donna.

ECOLOGICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Although the farm shut down in 1970,

the Marthas maintained their connection with the earth, planting fruit trees and growing their own berries and organic garlic. Sister Donna says the break from farming allowed them to develop a deeper spiritual relationship with the earth.

"Farming is a wonderful relational, but it's also production-oriented," she points out, "and when we moved away from that we began to be much more aware that the land and everything living on it has its own life."

During the past 30 years, this growing awareness of the interconnectedness of all living things – and the congregation's dwindling numbers – have led the Marthas to approach their legacy with a focus on preserving their land and sharing their resources. They built hermitage houses, nature trails, and a labyrinth – all of which are available to the public – and started developing an arboretum.

They also made plans for decommissioning their aging motherhouse. When the building came down in 2018, they were able to divert 94 percent of the materials away from the landfill. "We put it to rest in a way that honoured it and the land it stood on," says Sister Donna.

This September, marking 100 years since the congregation moved into the Bethany motherhouse, the sisters will open Bethany Centennial Garden on the same site. It will offer the public a place of beauty, peace, and prayer, while sharing the history of the Marthas.

MENTORS

After a retreat in 2011, Sister Florence was inspired to find a way to use their farmland to boost local food security and help mitigate climate change. She approached Sister Donna, who was then



Sister Florence Kennedy and Sister Donna Brady are members of the Sisters of St. Martha, an order associated with St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, N.S. The Marthas ran a working farm between 1922 and 1970, and they are now making use of their land and infrastructure to present the New Growers program, as an incubator for aspiring farmers. (Rose Murphy photo)

the head of the Marthas' Ecological Committee. The pair brought in Jen and David Greenberg, of Abundant Acres Farm in Centre Burlington, to design the organic market gardening program, and to serve as mentors.

"The program is really an incubator rather than a school or training program," says Jen.

It's intended as a bridge, to help new growers transition from apprenticing on someone else's farm to setting up their own. It gives them a chance to see what it's like to run their own business for a season. They tackle crop planning and marketing, two of the most challenging aspects of market gardening, with the support of seasoned mentors – and without having to invest in land and equipment right off the bat.

The sisters provide an acre of land, plus infrastructure – including hoop houses, a greenhouse, a wash station and cooler, a BCS walk-behind tractor, and good hand tools – and they underwrite the education program. The participants, working on their own or in teams, need only buy seeds, row cover, fertilizer, and gas for the tiller.

"Basically, the program allows people to make mistakes without losing their shirt," says Jen.

"Because it's not their shirt," David jokes.

Growers typically spend about \$2,000 to \$3,000 on inputs. They sell their produce, and pay the Marthas 50 percent of their profit, or \$4,000, whichever is less. With participants bringing in \$17,000 to \$20,000 in a season, and sometimes more, it's a pretty good deal.

SELF-CONFIDENCE

The Marthas aren't overly concerned about financial returns. "The focus is really education," says Sister Florence, "and letting people make the mistakes they had to make, build self-confidence in small market gardening, and learn."

Since the program launched in 2013, at least one participant from every year has continued growing food, and three of them have gone on to start their own market garden operations right in Antigonish County.

"That," says Sister Florence, "I see as a huge success."

HERITAGE

Michael Overmars, one of the program's first participants, grew up just down the road, and now runs his own market garden

on family land. His grandfather, Tony Van Gestel, was one of the Dutch immigrants working on the Bethany farm in the '50s, and he went on to start several successful local agricultural businesses that are still running today.

"I do certainly enjoy being a part of that heritage," Overmars says.

Though he studied sustainable agriculture in Ontario, Overmars found that one of the most important things he got from the Marthas' program was a hands-on education in intensive, minimum-tillage gardening. The Greenbergs teach participants how to use permanent raised bed systems and dense plantings, as well as hoop houses, row cover, and landscaping fabric – to help control weeds, and bring on crops earlier.

"Bethany did a really great job of showcasing this technique," says Overmars.

In 2015, the program presented a public workshop by Jean-Martin Fortier, the Quebec farmer whose book

The Market Gardener helped popularize these methods. About 50 people attended the workshop, from all across Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. Colleen Freake was one of the New Growers that year. "For me it was a huge deal," she says, recalling the "buzz" around Fortier at the time. "It was pretty powerful."

Sister Florence says public workshops are an important aspect of the program, because they "broaden that circle of hospitality to other people."

Freake also appreciated having a chance to make connections with other community groups addressing food security, the local farmers' market, hosting volunteers from the YMCA and the university, and students from the Coady International Institute. It was a profound experience, "as an entrepreneur, but also as a farmer," she says, "to see that a farm is not a single entity, it's a community organism."

Freake has worked on farms every season since. She credits the New Growers program with developing her confidence and leadership skills. In 2019 she managed a



Colleen Freake took part in the New Growers program in 2015. She says it was an invaluable opportunity to make connections with other community groups addressing food security, the local farmers' market, hosting volunteers from the YMCA and St. Francis Xavier University, and students from the Coady International Institute. (Sister Florence Kennedy photos)

busy market garden, and she is currently in the process of buying land and establishing her own farm.

Another alumnus is Gyungbo Noh. Originally from South Korea, he moved to Nova Scotia with his wife, Kendra MacEachern, who grew up outside of Antigonish. "The Bethany program was really good for giving me a chance to do everything myself," he says, adding that the relatively low financial risk was a key factor.

In addition to learning from the Greenbergs, Noh found the program very valuable as an opportunity to network with other market gardeners in the area. He went on to work collaboratively with the Lochaber Growers Co-operative. Since then, he and Kendra have bought land and launched their own operation, Homi Garden, just outside Antigonish.

MARKETING

Mac Brown, originally from British Columbia, didn't have much farming experience before starting the program. "It pushed me to put the knowledge into practice immediately," he says.

Brown, who currently runs Streamside Farm in Antigonish County, found that learning how to market his produce was one of the biggest takeaways. He realized the importance of becoming a better salesperson – which was partly a matter of being more affable and more confident chatting with his customers.

"Farming is so unique," he says, "in that, you can be the best farmer in the world, but if you can't sell your product ... there's no conclusion financially for you."

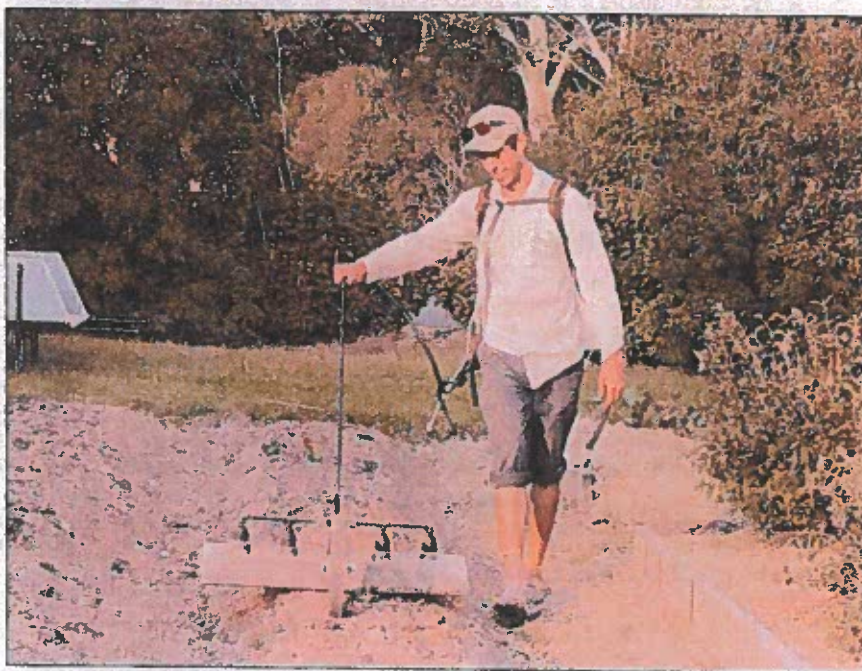
Eli Milton had apprenticed on farms before, but those experiences did not teach her much about crop planning, time management, or managing finances. With the New Growers, she was exposed to "the bigger picture" of running a farm business. "I had never done expenses or tracked income," she says, noting that the spreadsheets Jen Greenberg shared with her made doing it for the first time a lot easier.

But Milton got something even more important out of her experience as a New Grower. "It just solidified in me

that this is what I want to do," she says.

And that is one of the program's main objectives. "It's allowing young people to test and discover their dreams," says Sister Donna. "It's allowing people to stay in this area and figure out a way to make living."

(Rose Murphy grew up along the shores of St. George's Bay, outside Antigonish, N.S., and she keeps returning to them. She is interested in unusual characters and local food production, and is determined to learn to play the dulcimer someday.) ●



Michael Overmars, one of the program's first participants, using a flame weeder on the farm.



Mac Brown, who now runs Streamside Farm in Antigonish County, had little experience of agriculture before he took part in the New Growers program. He recalls the experience as being vital not only as a means of acquiring technical knowledge, but as an opportunity to hone his marketing skills.