

# The Dufferin Grove Organic Farmers' Market:

One Model for an Urban, Park-Based Market



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Farmers' Market:  
One Model for an Urban, Park-Based Market

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## Introduction

The purpose of this book is to discuss some of the key issues around farmers' markets in parks. We draw on stories and experiences from the Dufferin Grove Organic Farmers' Market to elaborate on each of these issues.

The success of the Dufferin Grove Market shows that it is a viable model, but any farmers' market in a park needs to fit in with the community that uses the space—and any policy for farmers' markets needs to be flexible enough to reflect the diversity of Toronto's communities. Of course, policies must also be responsive to what works for farmers! The farmers we have worked with make a great contribution to our community, not least as educators.



## History

Dufferin Grove Park has had a year-round farmers' market since November 2002. The market began as a collaboration between three local organic farmers already coming to the Riverdale Market (est. 2000) who wanted a year-round market in Toronto, interested community members, and park staff. This group wanted to develop a market model that could succeed in supporting local agriculture while enhancing our urban connection to the seasons and the sources of our food. From small beginnings, interest quickly grew, and the market today has about thirty vendors in peak season, more requests to participate than can be accommodated, and many enthusiastic supporters.

## Why put a farmers' market in a park?

Markets in parks draw people into enjoying their public spaces. Coming to the market is a great way to meet neighbours, find out what's happening in the community, and combine a walk or a trip to the playground or rink with getting fresh and healthy foods. We are able to take advantage of the beautiful shaded setting in the summer and the park buildings in winter, a much more inviting arrangement for encouraging community interaction than a parking lot.

“At Dufferin Grove, the integration of the market with the park – its connection to the wood burning oven, the gardens, the children's playgrounds, the basketball court, and the skating rink -- makes it an essential part of community life. It has a bustling, vital atmosphere as the vendors set up and customers arrive on foot and by bicycle while other park users engage in a variety of recreational activities nearby.” (Excerpt from Green Toronto Award Nomination. The market won this award in the Health Category for 2006).



## How does the market contribute to other activities in the park?

When the market started at Dufferin Grove, all of the food programs that had been around for years were enriched with fresher, local products. At pizza days by the big bake oven, families top their pizzas with fresh tomatoes and basil that began as market vendors' seedlings. The rink snack bar in winter, and the wading pool-side food cart in summer, have added soups and salads to their menus, all made from market produce. The market has also inspired new events and activities in the park.



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## FRIDAY NIGHT SUPPERS

Vegan and meat suppers are prepared from market ingredients and cooked in the park bake ovens—then enjoyed by sometimes up to 150 hungry neighbours. This event now runs in summer and winter months.

How it all started:

*Excerpt from the Dufferin Grove Park Newsletter, January 2003:*

If you find Saturdays and Sundays too crowded at the rink but you like getting out to the park, Friday nights are still pretty peaceful. So if you're coming home from a week of work, all bushed and ready to relax, scoop

up the kids or call up your girlfriend, get your skates and come down to the rink.

Dan DeMatteis, our summertime chef is back. On Friday nights, the rink house wood stove has a fire in it, and a couple of long tables are set up nearby. The chess and checkers and the play area are always set up, and now there is this addition: Dan's delicious food. He prepares seasonal food from the Thursday organic farmers' market: \$5 a plate. Depending on what's available at the farmers' market, Dan may also offer soup, antipasto, and/or dessert.

The bake ovens are the symbolic heart of the park, as well as the source of enormously popular bread which regularly sells out at the market.

*Excerpt from Market News, December 7, 2007:*

**Goodbye dreary rain, hello skating! Here's some news from the park:**

For the park bakers at Dufferin Grove the rink season means big changes. The temperature and humidity means we must adjust our recipes and of course our wood fired bake ovens need more wood to keep their temperatures up. Lea who has baked at Dufferin Grove for 7 years will be baking her favourite invention: Lemon Rosemary Sourdough with carefully shaved lemon zest, and of course the rest of our usual offerings from Rosemary to Rye. She will be hand forming each of these breads in the midst of hockey players and families and baking the bread as the snow falls.

**What do farmers and customers want from a market?**

From the start, we wanted to make the market viable for the farmers as well as useful for the community. Featuring the farms' products as central while building a selection broad enough to attract diverse customers and being receptive to participation from small-scale urban food producers have been parts of this picture.

*Letter from a market customer, November 23, 2006:*

"...if the Dufferin Grove Market didn't exist, I would have no access to an organic market. I don't own a car, nor do many of my friends...I am a bike riding, down town living urban dweller. These Dufferin Grove vendors must know that we are so appreciative of the time and sacrifice they make to come into the city to our park and our market. This is why every single week (almost anyway) for the last 4 years I have given them my patronage, my time and most importantly, my business - my money."

Angela Zehr

Seasonal markets, while they offer a wonderful celebration of peak harvest time, cannot offer critically important winter income for farmers. And they leave customers cut off from local food connections for more than half the year, even though farmers can offer storage crops, meats, cheeses and more, year-round. When markets are closed for the winter, the community loses this regular neighbourly ritual, and it can take weeks each spring to re-establish customers' weekly "market habit".

At Dufferin Grove, as spring takes hold, customers share in the farmers' excitement over plans for a new growing season.

*Excerpt from Market News, March 29, 2006.*

**From Angelos (Country Meadows Gardens):**

This weather is great for the greenhouses, everything is growing in leaps and bounds. Tomorrow I will have a very limited amount of my greenhouse salad greens and tomatoes. At present, we have in excess of 6,000 tomato plants in the greenhouses (made up of over 45 varieties of heirlooms), from tiny seedlings to tomato producing plants.

The goats all have kids, our heritage chickens are laying lots of eggs again, and some are already brooding, so soon we'll have baby chicks. We really have all the signs that spring has sprung at the farm.



Photo from Angelos Kapelaris, Country Meadows Farms.

*Excerpt from Market News, August 31, 2006*

Hello Market Friends:

Some of you may have read last Saturday's Globe and Mail article, "Farm Fresh or Farm Fake" about the problem of re-sellers in farmers' markets. Those of you who have become fans of the market recently might wonder just where we're at in this picture, so this week, a bit of background.

At our market, we don't have any "peddlers" who just drive to the food terminal to pick up produce that they set up on a nice "farmstand". Our farmers are all the real thing, but that doesn't mean we have 100% home-grown at every table. Our policies around this started from the market's origins as a year-round one. It's hard to keep customers' loyalty in February when the local selection drops off, but if organic broccoli and bananas are available along with the great storage vegetables, the baking, the meats and more, then people keep wanting to make the trip. Also, the profits from selling those imported foods go to our farmers, and that's important in the lean season.

In the summer, you'll still see some avocados and mangoes alongside Ontario produce at Greenfields' table, but the emphasis is strongly on their own farm's gorgeous selection. Connections between local farms are encouraged (like Ute Zell bringing her neighbour's lamb and Plan B bringing apples from Collingwood, etc.), although this can become complex when there is overlap with another farm's home-grown. That's something there's lots of ongoing discussion about. Sometimes a local supply is hard to come by, as in the case of certified organic pork, which the Berettas have had to source from farther afield now that their own farm is concentrating on beef. We have many quirks, too, like Bruno and Paula (the mushroom growers) selling amazing cheese from a farm high in the hills of Italy right next to their Stouffville shiitakes, and Angelos' "home-grown" including the olives from his farm in Greece.

When it comes to other vendors, they're all directly involved, not just selling a product line. Talk to Adolfo about the coffee he brings from Colombia, or Marc and Marie about the grains in their muesli, and you'll find out a lot. Actually, it's those conversations with producers that are one of the best things the market can offer, and a willingness to share the full story about the foods on offer is a requirement for all market participants. Please do ask when you're wondering.

*A farmer's perspective on year-round markets: Excerpt from a letter by Lorenz Eppinger, Greenfields Organic Farm, March 2007.*

While I completely support the idea of only producer based markets in season, we could have not survived as a farm nor extended our growing season without the opportunities given to us by various farmers markets that operate year round. At those locations we can sell our root crops in winter and supplement our selection with other local produce and imports. This has helped us build a much larger customer base and has helped us sell more of our own homegrown produce than we could have otherwise. Furthermore, we are no longer ditching valuable local produce or driving to markets with half empty trucks, early in the season when customers are taking their time to get back into the rhythm of shopping at seasonal markets. Year round markets have enabled us to hire local staff year round. These markets were also fundamental in helping us extend our own growing season at both ends. Some of the retail margins we could capture from imported products in the off season helped us build larger storage coolers. Similarly we had positive results with growing year round greens in unheated green houses and hope to extend that side of our business. Once again, we could not do this without supplementing our own local produce with imports in the off season as there wouldn't be enough of a variety to attract a large enough customer base. Nor would we have a big enough load to warrant, either ecologically or financially, driving our delivery van to market. Please also accept that farmers have to pay insurance, leases, mortgages etc. on buildings, equipment and delivery vehicles whether or not they go to market in winter.



Photo from Jesse and Ben Sosnicki's farm.

Over time, farmers like the Sosnickis have found ways to strengthen their local winter selection, such as offering frozen corn and beans from the summer surplus, and wonderful perogies and cabbage rolls made from their storage crops. Demand always exceeds supply, and each new local product is warmly received by market customers.

Also, effective connections between farms like Greenfields and Pfennings, a farmer-distributor that works with other regional farms as well as supplying organic imports, mean that Greenfields' storage crops can be picked up on the farm on the same trip as produce that's required to round out the market selection gets dropped off, creating an environmentally friendly loop.

To ensure that the focus on local farms' own products remains central, we have developed market guidelines. This excerpt outlines some of our grower policies:

- **For farmers, during the Ontario growing season, no more than 30% of a vendor's produce can come from other than their own farm (or land directly under their management).**
- **Grower-priority: When a farmer has home-grown produce to sell, other vendors are not permitted to sell the same produce if they have not grown it unless they have the consent of the farmer who has brought home-grown. Direct communication between vendors is encouraged on an ongoing basis; whenever possible, a week ahead. Market organizers may also be asked to assist in ensuring that grower-vendors get priority.**
- **Only those growers who meet this requirement to sell mainly their own products in season can import out of season.**

In some ways our mix of vendors looks to longstanding market traditions, while in others it reflects the diversity of our urban community and our global, as well as local connections.

An additional aspect of this is our inclusion of small, city-based food production ventures. Prepared foods to eat on the spot or take home for an easy dinner are very popular at the market, and attract both busy people on their way home from work and many families with small children. The market has built strong relationships between the makers of prepared foods and the farms as the source of their ingredients.

In some cases, the market has served as an "incubator", helping small food businesses get a start. Camros Organic Foods, a popular vendor of Persian-inspired salads that started in farmers' markets, now operates a café near Yonge and Bloor Sts.

*Excerpt from Market News, June 28, 2006:*

School's out! Time to enjoy beautiful summer evenings in the park. There's a great selection of choices for dinner at the market so you can linger a little longer after you get your groceries. Roti, crepes, salads, pizza, burgers and veggie sushi are just some of the possibilities.

We'll be wrapping up our market survey this week, so don't forget to hand one in if you haven't yet, and you'll have a chance to win a basket of market goodies. So far, one of the things that really stands out in the responses is just how much people value eating local. And local just keeps getting better these days!

*From Joanne Kates, Globe and Mail, Saturday, April 29, 2006:*

Toronto's food markets are both funky and delicious....This excellence as a food city owes something to its stellar chefs...but is more about the great middle ground, where ordinary people are eating *pho* and Jamaican patties and dim sum and organic beef and smoked trout from Muskoka, and they're buying food at the Riverdale and Dufferin Grove farmers markets. This plethora of food fun adds up to a city where people have decided to put their taste buds very high on the list of what matters.

*From NOW magazine, April 20-26, 2006:*

When it comes to putting your money where your mouth is, there's only one way to interact with our green food scene-in the front lines, face-to-face with the source. Here's where to find the best locally grown produce in town. DUFFERIN GROVE ORGANIC FARMERS MARKET 875 Dufferin, south of Bloor, 416-392-0913, [www.dufferinpark.ca/market](http://www.dufferinpark.ca/market) Thursdays 3 to 7 pm year-round. [Followed by a list of other markets].

*Dufferin Grove Market vendors:*

- four main produce farms bring a rich variety of vegetables, three in attendance year-round
- a mushroom farm
- a small, specialty farm with heirloom tomatoes, herbs, eggs, and products from the family farm in Greece (olives, oil)
- a fruit grower (in season)
- three meat farms, with beef, pork, lamb, goat, wild boar, poultry and venison year-round
- one fisher
- a sheep farmer with cheese, yogurt and lamb pies
- bread baked in the wood-fired ovens at the park, and another bread baker
- a city-based seed and seedling producer
- a city-based (indoor) sprout farm
- specialty baking and high-nutrition organic foods including some for those on special diets
- prepared foods including roti, crepes, salads and burgers, as well as food prepared in the park kitchens, all featuring ingredients from the farms
- two flower growers (in season)
- flour and grains from a local farm with a mill
- honey
- fair-trade coffee, teas, spices and chocolate
- wild foods such as dried mushrooms, wild berry preserves and maple syrup



In summary, we follow these principles:

- provide the community with a viable selection
- let farmers benefit when imports are needed
- yield to local
- support grower-priority
- welcome city-based food producers while keeping the main focus on farms

## Other Vendor Issues

### Non-Destructive Competition

While a healthy level of competition benefits customers, we want to respect the hard work that vendors put into coming to market, so we don't include new vendors if we have an adequate supply of similar products.

### Transparency

We have outlined the ways in which we allow farmers to sell products that are not their own. This privilege is only extended to producers. Only vendors directly involved in the production of the goods they sell are eligible for participation.

Transparency, that is, the willingness to share information about the source of all products and production methods with market organizers and customers, is something we highly value. Each year the market manager and some of the park staff conduct visits to farms.

*Excerpt from market news, June 8, 2006:*

Hello Market Friends:

Last Friday, park staff Mayssan, Jenny and Mary and garden volunteers Rema, Claudia and Chris, together with Jutta and myself headed to Stonehenge Farms (Ute Zell and Tom Greenall) and Ted Thorpe's.

It was great to see Ute coaching a first-time mother with her moments-old kid and to meet the approximately four hundred other contented residents of the goat barns, as well as to watch the wild boars in action and admire the peacocks and llamas. Best of all was to get the chance to sit down with Ute and Tom (and some fine farm food) and talk about life, farming and all the rest of it away from the usual hubbub of the market. Then on to Ted's, where the fields are filling up with all the great stuff we love to eat. We got to ask lots of questions about timing and techniques for growing favourite vegetables as well as admiring Ted's talents for reno. in his farmhouse, and the mosquitoes didn't quite succeed in carrying Claudia away. A really satisfying trip!

## Crafts

Once the market was established, local craftspeople began asking to sell their products alongside the food vendors. It seemed like a good idea initially: neighbours showing their wares in their own community. However, the right "fit" wasn't there. Buying weekly groceries is very different from shopping for crafts. The craft vendors sold very little, the market became crowded for customers, and requests to join, as well as the support required for all these vendors, became unmanageable. We realized that the market should concentrate on food only, with the minor exception that farmers may include products such as goats' milk soap or beeswax candles when they are connected to their food production. Some separate seasonal craft fairs have been organized, and these have been more successful.



## Running the Market

The market benefits from the excellent support of park staff who share information with interested community members passing through the park. The staff also help set up and take down the market every week, and assist the vendors with logistics and troubleshooting. They run a snack bar during the market that also opens at other times in the park, and they sell bread made in the bake ovens. The variety of roles the staff play contributes to and demonstrates the sense of continuity between the market and other park activities, and the close relationship between the market vendors and the neighbourhood.

The vendors also have a market manager whose responsibilities include vendor selection and communications, writing the weekly market email news, and overseeing the setup of the market each week. Wages for the manager (who is not a city employee) come from weekly table fees collected from vendors. A weekly contribution to the park is also made from the table fees, and any remaining funds are used to cover expenses (such as copying), or held in reserve for future requirements. We try to keep table fees very affordable for the participants, operating with a modest surplus in the outdoor season which covers the small deficit in the indoor season. Each vendor's payment is based on the number and size of tables they require as a way to assess their share in supporting the operation of the market.

## Market News

The farmers' market is the stage for a great deal of conversation between farmers and city-dwellers. It is a rare opportunity for each group to engage and share with the other. To complement this dialogue, we provide regular information to customers through the weekly market news, and we encourage customers to use the market as a learning opportunity. Our newsletter has over 400 subscribers, and the market page on the [www.dufferinpark.ca](http://www.dufferinpark.ca) website receives an average of over 4,000 visits per month.

*Excerpt from market news, January 18, 2006:*

Last weekend, I heard a fiddler play a strange and haunting tune from Sweden called "Bark Bread". It was written in the 1860s, when Sweden experienced a period of several years of terrible cold, with winters lasting til July. Sometimes bread made from bark was all there was to eat. Nowadays we have our own weather worries, of a different sort, but luckily, the farmers' stores are still plentiful. Come to the market and you can enjoy a winter night's feast of local bounty.

The park bakers will have the ovens just right for all their (bark-free) breads and delicious pizza, and up in North York, Alli the baker will be rising at 2 a.m., as usual, to start working her magic for us.

From the Sosnickis: Ben will have in abundance potatoes, carrots, onions and a spotlight on cabbage this week! We've still got some big bins of great looking and tasting heads!

### **Roasted Cabbage:** (Really yummy!)

Simply slice as much cabbage as you want (I use a whole head) into 1 inch strips. Melt a couple or more tablespoons of butter and toss together. Place in a thin layer on a large roasting sheet. Roast at 500 degrees for half an hour or so turning frequently to expose all sides of cabbage. Watch you don't burn it! When soft and roasted add some caraway or cumin seeds to taste as well as some salt and pepper! Enjoy!

*A letter by customer and market enthusiast Jutta Mason, March 7, 2007:*

One of the joys of a farmers' market for me is that you don't really have to decide on a menu for the day or the week when you shop. What you cook depends on what's being sold at the market. I go there on Thursdays and buy what looks good and come home and think about what I can cook up for dinner. This past week my father-in-law came to dinner and as I was serving it up, he asked me who I bought the various ingredients from. I listed off the storage vegetables -- carrots and potatoes -- and the corn (frozen from summer) that Ben Sosnicki put in my bags. I got the wild boar shoulder from Ute Zell's Stonehenge Farm table; it came from one of those dark hairy boars I saw running through their little pine forest when I visited Ute's farm last summer. The duck fat (very healthy!) that I used to roast the potatoes and the carrots came from one of Ute's ducks, fat rendered after our Christmas duck dinner and frozen. The big salad of mixed greens came from a man named Jonathan who has a greenhouse near Greenfields Farm. Lorenz Eppinger, who sells the salad mix at the Greenfields market table, says that he's doing well enough (from the year-round markets he attends) that he can put in his own greenhouse salad mix for next year. The cinnamon bun for dessert was baked in the park ovens a few hours before our dinner. It tasted so good with Mapleton's vanilla ice cream -- which didn't come from the market, but from a little ice cream producer whose plant and farm are located an hour and a half out of Toronto. I buy it at a grocery store up the street.

The local-food tally wasn't perfect. I had cooked up the corn with some bits of hot pepper which probably came from Egypt. The eggs in the cinnamon buns were fine -- they came from market vendor Angelos Kapelaris' chickens. But the flour came from Quebec. So we lost a bunch of Kyoto points with the pepper and a few more with the flour. But other than that, our family gathered around the dinner table to eat a very tasty supper that was almost totally locally-grown -- at the beginning of March, in this winter country, with thick snow outside! And the merit wasn't even mine, I didn't have to think ahead. All I had to do is go to the farmers' market and buy what's on offer there.

### **Parking**

A small survey we conducted in the summer of 2006 indicated that over three quarters of our customers walk or cycle to the market. This is a great feature of neighbourhood markets. For those who do drive, however, parking can be an issue. Through our councillor, we were able to request a minor change to the on-street parking hours on a nearby street to help with this.

For farmers with heavy loads to move, convenient access to vehicles is very important. In the summer, the vendors are allowed to drive into the market area so they can sell directly off their trucks. We set up on the rink pad in the fall to avoid driving on wet ground and to make use of the overhead lighting as the days get shorter. In the winter, most vendors unload from the street and then park on-street nearby.

### **Public Health**

Of course, food safety is an important concern for any market. We have benefited from a positive relationship with Public Health, and we have encouraged awareness of safe handling guidelines among all vendors.

Public Health has recently created a condensed Food Handlers' course for vendors of all potentially hazardous foods, which is a positive development for this issue.

### **Permits**

Since the Dufferin Grove Market contributes to other recreation programs in the park, as well as being a community-building recreation program itself, the market has recently applied for a partnership permit with Recreation. This type of permitting agreement recognizes the connection of this market to both Parks and Recreation.

November 2006, market customer Deirdre Newman wrote:  
4 years. It has been the best event in our neck of the Toronto woods, the market.



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