

Harvest Hastings takes steps to be more producer and consumer friendly



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By Chris Drost

Harvest Hastings has operated as a not-for-profit organization in Hastings County since 2008. While its initial purpose of promoting local food and products and connecting consumers with producers is still the objective of the organization, the way they are doing that is changing with the launch of its new user and producer friendly website in early March.

In the past, Harvest Hastings produced a printed catalogue of local farms and other producers of products from across Hastings County. That was the way things were done back in 2008. Now, with a trend towards online shopping, Harvest Hastings is making the move to connect local producers and consumers through its website.

Louise Livingstone was the coordinator for Harvest Hastings from 2008 until recently. The torch has now been passed to Karen Stille who is known for her work with Homegrown Hamper, an online virtual farmer's market. Stille will take on the role of part-time operations manager.

Harvest Hastings is a membership-based organization with basic annual memberships a \$25 and enhanced memberships at \$50 annually. A volunteer board of directors governs Harvest Hastings with meetings held on the third Thursday of the month.

Throughout the years, Harvest Hastings has been assisted by a number of organizations and government bodies. Hastings County was its lead partner from the start. The province helped establish the first website and grants were obtained from Hastings Federation of Agriculture, the City of Belleville, City of Quinte West's Agricultural Advisory Committee and Community Futures of North and Central Hastings and South Algonquin. The new website has been made possible with the help once again from Community Futures.

Harvest Hastings is also collaborating this year with the students from the Business and Marketing Program at Loyalist College. With the assistance of the students, a survey will be conducted in 2021 to help the organization better understand how it can better serve its members.

Bancroft This Week held a Zoom meeting recently with Jennifer Davis, chair of Harvest Hastings to learn more about upcoming changes and especially, how they could benefit producers and consumers in North Hastings.

?Initially Harvest Hastings put in for a grant from OMAFRA for a Shopify site. This was probably okay {the grant was not successful] as in order to have an online store site you need one place for everything to come to. Because technology is better, producers want to have a store on their own site,? says Davis.

If producers are interested, the redeveloped Harvest Hastings website will make finding a producer easier for customers and connecting to products easier. Letters are going out to 165 producers currently in the magazine [to let them know about the new website]. It will also be posted on the FB page, Instagram and Twitter. ?Producers will be able to watch a webinar, funded by Community Futures in partnership with Hastings County, where they can learn how to get on the site or make edits to their current profile,? says Davis.

?It is so fun when stuff starts to come together. Some good things have come out of COVID,? explains Davis. Harvest Hastings was contacted by Bob Mallard, who is with the business and marketing program at Loyalist College. Davis did an online presentation to the class on Zoom and now the students are working on two separate initiatives for Harvest Hastings. Four small groups are working on a producer survey that will ask producers what more could Harvest Hastings do to help them. The letters that are being mailed out shortly will also tell producers about the survey in addition to upcoming recorded webinars that will help guide producers through establishing a profile on the Harvest Hastings website, ways to offer online sales etc. The students will follow up the letters with phone calls to all the producers while the other group will focus on marketing.

Davis says that they want to know what additional workshops would interest producers. This could include anything from soil cultivation, to seed cleaning, use of new technology, changing niche markets, branding, making their own webinars, and more.

Davis highlighted an important shift in how people are buying food since the start of the pandemic. ?Before COVID we went to an event at Empty Bowls and asked people if they would buy products online. Most of the older demographic said they would not, but the younger ones said they would. Since COVID, buying things online all of a sudden is a reality. There is a big shift now. Now older people are more likely to buy online because they want to be safe,? explains Davis.

At the moment there are not a lot of producers from North Hastings included on the website. Davis says that there will be advertising on the radio and in their magazine to help producers from the north learn about Harvest Hastings. As a former Bancroft resident, Davis stressed the importance of engaging more producers from North Hastings.

Last year, Harvest Hastings was not sure about putting out a magazine as there was concern it was directed to tourists during a pandemic. Through an arrangement with Tweed News, 5,000 copies ended up being printed as there were people wanting to advertise in the publication. She explained that it was a good thing they went ahead as the magazines flew off the shelf because people wanted to take a little trip to the country to find local food. ?We heard from people that they were putting Hastings County's Wildly Authentic and the Harvest Hastings magazine together to put ideas together for short outings,? says Davis.

Producers are listed in the Harvest Hastings magazine but if you buy a membership you get a full profile in the magazine. This year, everyone who fills out the survey gets one free year in the magazine with a full profile. For those producers not currently on the list, they can contact info@harvesthastings.ca by email to be included. One of the new webinars will explain how to add or edit a post on the website. The letters being sent out will provide each producer with their own user ID and password.

Stille will keep a daily presence on the FB page and once producers are friends on FB, she will post any news items producers share about their business so it appears on the Harvest Hastings page.

?I hope people have learned it is not complicated and doesn't take much time to go to a farm or market and that they will keep it up,? says Davis.

Look for the latest Harvest Magazine in local shops starting in June.