

# Planting seeds of a dream: A growing number of people in B.C. are pursuing the challenges of farm life

BY GLENDA LUYMES, THE PROVINCE MAY 20, 2014



Andy and Cara Abrahams work their small farm in Chilliwack on May 8, 2014.

**Photograph by:** wayne leidenfrost, PROVINCE

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**CHILLIWACK** — The forecast is calling for rain.

A shower would be a blessing today, watering 450 new endive plants at Abundant Acre Farm — but only if Andy and Cara Abrahams can get them into the ground on time.

As Andy places the seedlings on freshly tilled rows of soil, his wife Cara moves along behind, tucking them into the earth.

The crop, which was seeded in the farm's germination room three weeks ago, will eventually be sold directly to the "end eater," says Cara. This relationship with the consumer is one of the keys to the farm's success.

The Abrahams are among a growing group of B.C. farmers who are making a living on small leased farms by selling their produce directly to the public through farmers' markets and food boxes that provide customers with a weekly share of the harvest.

B.C. farmer-to-consumer sales have risen 147 per cent in recent years, from \$46 million in 2006 to \$113 million in 2012, according to B.C. Association of Farmers' Markets research conducted by Dr. David Connell.

Statistics Canada data also shows the amount of leased farmland in B.C. is rising (from 29 per cent in 1981 to almost 46 per cent in 2011), while farmland owned by farm operators is declining (from 70 per cent to 56 per cent).

"To get in the game, you have to start small, oftentimes by leasing or licensing land, and you need to get the best price for what you produce," says Sara Dent, coordinator with Young Agrarians, a networking group for new farmers.

A recent study by University of B.C. masters candidate Jessica Dennis shows that the cost of land is identified as the largest barrier to those who have just started farming and those who want to farm.

"It's definitely a different starting scenario than 50 years ago," says Dennis. "We're seeing more young people coming from non-farming backgrounds who want to farm."

Leasing is a way around B.C.'s notoriously high land prices, but it's not without its challenges.

"Profitability can be problematic (for small-scale farmers)," admits Dennis, who analyzed Statistics Canada data that shows some small farms report negative income, meaning off-farm jobs may be helping to keep dreams afloat. "But that's not to say you can't do it."

Andy and Cara Abrahams don't come from farm families. But a few years ago, while working at a summer camp in Princeton, they began to grow a garden. When it was time to move on, there was little work to be found in Andy's previous trade, cabinet making.

"So we said, why don't we try farming," he recalls.

That was 2009, a warm year that led to a successful harvest. They hopped from one leased field to another before finding an almost ideal situation two years ago — a 10-year lease of a home and one-and-a-half acres in Greendale.

The farm needs to sell about \$50,000-worth of vegetables each year to remain profitable, says Andy. The couple's sole income comes from the farm, he adds.

The Abrahams' dream is to become more efficient over the next eight years, doubling production and selling enough organic produce to eventually be able to buy a little land of their own.

But spring is no time for dreaming. It's one of busiest seasons on the farm, with almost daily planting of crops. Before seedlings can go into the ground, Andy must loosen the soil by tilling. Then comes

planting, a task done by hand.

Abundant Acre is divided into six-row sections, with several different crops occupying each long row. To a bird, the farm would look like a woven basket, alternating strips of green and brown.

To extend their growing season, the Abrahams use movable greenhouses. A few weeks ago, one house covered six rows of beet seedlings. It has since moved down the row to cover a more recently planted six-row section of cabbage. It will soon move again, rolling down to the tomato patch, where it will stay for most of the summer. In the fall, it will likely harbour some winter greens.

Andy calls the farming methods he uses “approachable.”

“This farm is human-scale. We can do the work ourselves,” he explains.

The result of their hard work is “super fresh” produce that is sold the day it’s harvested, including varieties consumers may not find at grocery stores because they’re too perishable or don’t transport well over hundreds of kilometres.

“We hear all the time, ‘I don’t like tomatoes, but I like your tomatoes,’” says Cara. “Our senses of taste and smell tell us what’s good for us.”

As morning wears into afternoon, the skies above Chilliwack darken. It begins to rain, nourishing 450 happy endive plants.

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*Follow the Abrahams through the joys and challenges of a growing season in the Sunday Province, where we’ll be running monthly stories about Abundant Acre Farm — from planting through harvest to the consumer’s table, with a few stops in between.*

*For daily farm and food news, visit The Province’s Farmgate blog at [theprovince.com/farmgate](http://theprovince.com/farmgate).*

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