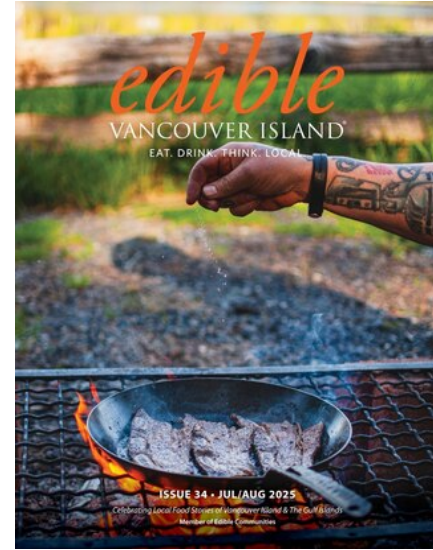


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The Future of Farming

By Camilla Sampson (https://ediblevancouverisland.ediblecommunities.com/author/camilla-sampson/) | May 6, 2025



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Part of what has been known as “the land of plenty” by the K’ómoks First Nation for millennia, the Comox Valley has long been considered a bread basket for the central Vancouver Island region; the Farmers’ Market bustles; farm stands from Black Creek to Courtenay overflow with delicious produce; berries, eggs, vegetables, and meats are abundant.

Yet despite the quality of local produce, an estimated 85% of Vancouver Island’s food is imported annually (*Vancouver Island Economic Alliance, 2018*). With uncertainty around U.S. imports, changing climate conditions, the vulnerability of food supply we’ve seen during events like the pandemic, and the environmental and financial cost of transport, improving food security is vital. And while the Comox Valley has some 351 farms (*Ministry of Agriculture and Food: Agricultural Census, 2021*), many face threats to their continuation: reliable water access, drought, small profit margins, and competition from grocery stores unequipped to source from small farms.



Images courtesy of Whitaker Farm



Images courtesy of Whitaker Farm

Seeking a New Generation of Farmers

There’s also an urgent need to engage a new generation in agriculture. In 2021, the average age of a B.C. farmer was 57.8 years old (*Statistics Canada, 2021*). Even when a young farmer is keen, it’s harder than ever to find, and afford, land. “Land access is the number one challenge for new farmers. The real estate value of farmland is at an all-time high,” says Darcy Smith, B.C. Land Matching Program Manager at Young Agrarians. Between 2014 and 2023, farmland prices in B.C. increased by 64.1% (*Farm Credit Canada’s Farmland Values Report, 2023*).

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“It’s an unprecedented situation,” says Whitaker Farm owner/operator Mariette Sluyter, reflecting on the shift from Gen X’s ability to purchase farmland to today. Deeply committed to land stewardship for future generations, with her husband, Brian Padlewski, the goal is to transition farmland into the hands of non-family members in meaningful ways, without cash transactions.

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Extensive research into succession planning has included employee ownership models, a land trust to ensure it remains farmland (their ideal), whether sub-division would be possible for future small-scale farming, and, currently, ensuring the farm is a viable business someone could take on; finding an option that supports this vision of preserving food access and soil health, while making retirement possible, has been tough.

But there is hope. National organizations are finding ways to support a new generation far beyond inspiring them to grow food.

Cultivating More Than Crops: Education and Access

Farmer-to-farmer educational resource network Young Agrarians (YA) is one such organization. They have an incredible land matching program funded by the provincial government, with additional funding for farms on Vancouver Island from the Cowichan Valley Regional District. It facilitates young farmers with available leases and helps landowners eager to share their resources find suitable matches. Since the program expanded to Vancouver Island in 2018, it has seen 104 matches; 26 of those within the Comox Valley of 159 acres total. “In the last few years, we’ve seen a lot more emerging interest and land opportunities in Comox — really *great* opportunities; land owners wanting to do transitions and figure out what the future looks like,” shares Smith.

The Power of Peer-to-Peer Connection

Jaclyn Kirby, owner of Yellow Boot Farm, secured land through YA’s land matching program: “We wouldn’t exist without them, or other farms, helping us, specifically female farmers.” It was this connection to other local farmers Kirby values most, particularly regarding the nuances of farming in a specific area: “You can watch all the YouTube videos you want but it won’t apply to your specific region, specific practices.”

The “number one thing farmers say they want, and benefit from, is mentorship, peer-to-peer learning,” confirms Smith. “New farmers are coming in not from a family-farm background, bootstrapping, doing it all themselves... while trying to scale to a sustainable level.” YA facilitates apprenticeships and plenty of digital and in-person learning and networking programs.

“There’s also lots about learning from peers, that isn’t just about the learning — it comes down to relationships. On the ground, farmer mental health is a big conversation these days,” notes Smith.

Kirby is now returning the favour of sharing knowledge through YA as she looks to the future of farming in other ways. In 2024, she began a dry farming experiment with Kwantlen Polytechnic University, Oregon State University, and The Dry Farming Institute in response to water security concerns; a reminder that small farms often take the risk of testing alternative methods for the future of food security instead of large-scale agriculture.

Finding the Balance

On the other side of the lease equation, Heather Mills and her husband, Simon Toole, of Good Earth Farm Seeds have been delighted to see the next part of their dream come to fruition. “We’ve always felt we wanted to share what we are so privileged to have,” says Mills. In 2024, with support from YA, Natasha Anderson-Brass of Minwaadizi Farm, an Indigenous-led social enterprise growing organic and regionally adapted foods, seeds, and medicines, joined them.

Being able to navigate in lease and all the ins and outs... Young Agrarians offers that support for FIER which is really important to people," says Mills. What stood out to Mills about YA's facilitation was that, instead of the landowner holding the primary position of power, "the agreement creates a good balance and gave her (Natasha) some of the power back;" a priority for Mills' values.

The Bigger Picture

From soil health and increased nutrition to food security and mental health, supporting local farms goes far beyond simply enjoying the bounty of local ingredients. And it can also be an act of reconciliation. "Indigenous people were the first farmers here and were very successful, because of that, it [farming] was taken from them. In a small way, I've realized what we have to offer is land," says Mills, who is of Indigenous (Ojibway) and British ancestry.

Good Earth Farm Seeds and Minwaadizi Farm have a shared vision to co-create a place of Indigenous healing, incorporating ceremonies and growing different medicines. "Being on the land gives so much. It allows a person to be themselves — connected to everything," says Mills.



Supporting small, consistently

In supporting these local farms, consistency is *everything*. Small farms respond to changes in demand with supply, but it can take a year (or two) for even established farms to pivot.

"At the start of the pandemic, we saw a big turn to local. Farmers expanded their CSAs (Community Supported Agriculture) at the start of the season to support this need for food. And then...people went back to "normal". Farmers had to absorb that loss after expanding to support those customers," shares Smith.

We want local food, and we need it. But supporting small farms requires more than good intentions — it requires consistency. When produce is plentiful, buy extra and freeze it. Discover the joys of a CSA box that fits your schedule. And whenever possible, support the few grocery stores that prioritize small-scale local farms, such as Courtenay's Edible Island Whole Foods Market.

Ultimately, convenience is one of the biggest barriers to sustaining small farms, but so is understanding their true value beyond price. Most small farms operate with organic, regenerative, spray-free, and other holistic practices. Their produce is fresher, richer in nutrients, and grown with a focus on soil and human health. Supporting them isn't just about food — it's about preserving sustainable agriculture, protecting local economies, and ensuring that future generations inherit more than solely the memory of what once grew here.

Camilla Sampson is a writer and editor living in Campbell River. She has been telling stories about culinary traditions, seasonal ingredients, and community-based foodie travel for over 10 years. She loves discovering stories that use food as a lens to connect with natural ecosystems and local people through the food that we grow, forage, and eat.

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