

Molly: London, Ontario known as one of the greenest and most Resilient Cities in Canada. Wait, what? Okay, maybe it isn't yet. That's the London Environmental Network's vision for our city. This podcast asks how close we are to realizing that vision. This is a tour of sustainability in London. I'm Molly Miksa. I'll be your tour guide.

Hello, and welcome. I'm excited to get started. In this and the next episode of the podcast, we're talking about local food—healthy, ecologically sustainable, diverse and equitable local food. This topic is giant, and I'm not going to try to tackle the whole system. Rather, we'll be looking at specific initiatives that relate to the system as a whole.

As always, I'll be considering where London sits on the spectrum of green, resilient cities. And as always, I have a dreamy eyed resiliency goal, and it is the goal of self sufficiency. So the question is: how close can London get to meeting its own food needs? Digging into that very general goal a bit, we need to ask, "Who's food needs?" which leads to the ideas of food security and food sovereignty. Food security in London would mean making sure that all Londoners, at all times, have access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food, to meet their dietary needs and food preferences.

Related to that is the deeper concept of food sovereignty. Food Secure Canada defines food sovereignty as: "the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems." That definition is attributed to La Via Campesina, or the International Peasants' Movement. Food Sovereignty has seven pillars, and they are as follows:

- Focus on Food for People
- Build Knowledge and Skills
- Work with Nature
- Value Food Providers
- Localize Food *Systems*
- Put Control Locally, and finally
- Food is Sacred

Food sovereignty relates to Indigenous knowledge systems, diversity and closed-loops, meaning communities that grow the food, distribute, prepare, and eat the food—so they decide what food they want to produce, and how it's produced.

Initiatives to promote food sovereignty include:

Ojibiikaan, the Indigenous Cultural Network: Founded in 2018 (in Toronto), to address gaps related to Indigenous food sovereignty. According to their website, Ojibiikaan provides opportunities to engage with the land through activities like medicine walks, snowshoeing, sugarbush tapping, gardening and traditional cooking. Their programming is centred on ceremony, offerings, songs and storytelling.

There's also the Afri-Can Food Basket, that's been championing Food Justice and Food Sovereignty for Toronto's African, Caribbean, Black community since 1995. Their initiatives include supporting and encouraging African-Canadian farmers, composting, seed saving, education and cultivating youth leadership.

While the goal I had in mind for local food in London was self-sufficiency, I think it will be clear that the work my guests are doing speaks very directly to food security in London (making sure everyone has access to good healthy food). We aren't going to be talking a lot, directly, about food sovereignty, which is why I wanted to mention it off the top. It is next level thinking about our food systems, and it's important, and I want to keep it in mind moving forward.

In the episode I'll be talking to: Mariam Waliji about Urban Roots London and the Forest City Workers Co-op; and Mike Bloxam, about the London Food Bank.

The initiatives they're involved with make me feel hopeful and excited about the possibilities for sustainable food growth in London. Are they working? Are the systems changing? Let's find out.

Mariam Waliji is someone with a pretty good sense of the sustainable food scene in London. We met in November, 2020 in Thames Park, to dish about food.

Mariam: Hello, my name is Mariam.

Molly: Mariam studied evolutionary biology and genetics at Queen's University, focusing a little bit on ecology, but more on how the Industrial Revolution impacted human evolution with regard to people's access to medicine and food. Ultimately, she left academia and...

Mariam: It turned into a winding road. So I was actually working in finance for a little bit. That was not for me. I realized that it was pretty soul crushing. So while I was working in finance, I started... My parents owned a restaurant growing up, so I knew how to serve at a really young age. So I worked in fine dining, and then ended up working at the Root Cellar. And through the Root Cellar, which is just an amazing place but the basis is the understanding that food is political. And so while I was there, I was working in a restaurant scene, but also working alongside these amazing activists, who really introduced me to, you know, that food security and food sovereignty scene in London. And through the Root Cellar, I was connected with the Urban Roots. While I was at the Root Cellar, I did a lot of their communications work. So, like, social media and things like that. And so we were going to be working alongside Urban Roots, and getting some of the produce from the farm into the restaurant, I was like, oh, well, if we're doing that, and I'm going to be featuring them, I should have an understanding of this organization. So I went one day, and then just never left. I volunteered there for a year and then joined the board shortly thereafter, and have been on the board since.

Molly: Let's take a quick step back for some context. As she said, Mariam worked at the Root Cellar, which is a restaurant specializing in local, sustainable food, located in London's Old East

Village. The Root Cellar is one branch of the Forest City Workers Co-Op. Other branches include:

On The Move Organics, which many Londoners know from their in-person grocery shop and juice bar at the Western Fair Farmers Market, both of which have recently closed. On The Move's online grocery store and food box delivery program are still going strong though.

And then there's London Brewing Cooperative, which is a worker owned brew pub and event space, that sells locally sourced organic beer. Mariam was with the Forest City Workers Co-Op for five years, having left shortly before I spoke with her. Here's Mariam again, to tell you more about Urban Roots London.

Mariam: So Urban Roots London is a food agriculture nonprofit. So we have some space within the city of London. So we're only like urban farm in the city right now, which is really exciting. So we're just at Highbury and Hamilton, and basically our whole model is to take green space in the city, revitalize it, and then grow food that can be accessible to everyone, so, regardless of financial situation. There is not only a need, but like, a dignity, in being able to access really beautiful food. And beautiful can mean a lot of different things, but it's like: good for you; it's good for the environment; it's exciting. And so we're able to distribute it by our model of thirds.

Molly: The Urban Roots "model of thirds" means that at least one third of the farm's produce is donated to charities and social service agencies. These include My Sister's Place and Crouch Resource Center. One third is offered at equitable retail prices to individuals who come to farm gate sales, and to organizations such as Growing Chefs (a charity dedicated to food education) and Edgar and Joe's Cafe (a social enterprise and community space). Finally, a maximum of one third is sold at full wholesale price to supporters (as in higher end restaurants). I asked Mariam how Urban Roots has fared in the pandemic. (8:08)

Mariam: I mean, it's definitely been a different season. All things considered, it was okay, like it was good. We... obviously our wholesale, like our restaurant partners were not ordering from us as much as they typically do. But it was kind of okay, because there was such a need from the community, that we reduced the third that we offer wholesale, but we massively increased the third that we were donating and that was just to meet a community need. You know, the folks at My Sister's Place were doing so many more meals, and Crouch Resource Center was offering so many more food boxes and support to the community, that we were happy to do that pivot. And fortunately, with some of the relief that was offered by the government, we were still able to do pretty alright. Our educational programming took a hit—I didn't do as many school groups as I like to do—but we were still able to find creative ways to do that. The fundraiser, the Harvest Dinner, that's kind of my big thing that I've always been involved in is the annual fundraiser. And so we pivoted that this year. We did kind of like an at-home harvest dinner. And it was extremely successful. We still sold out. People were so supportive. We don't currently have all-year growing, so over the winter months the board does a lot of administration and planning

and strategic planning, but we don't have an income. So the harvest dinner is kind of our last hurrah.

Molly: There's no hot house at this point?

Mariam: No, we don't. We just have the hoop house but we can't grow there over the winter. We don't have a greenhouse, because we don't actually own the land—so we can't build on it. But basically, the harvest dinner is kind of like a way for us to fundraise, and then have this seed funding for buying seeds and updating equipment...

Molly: Literally seed funding!

Mariam: Literally seed funding, yeah.

Molly: So, a little fundraising news here: in early 2021, Urban Roots London launched a crowdfunding campaign, to raise money to buy their land. In March, 2021, they announced that they'd been successful in raising over \$50,000 through the campaign, and that they would indeed be able to buy the land.

Molly: And then I guess with the On the Move Organics family, you've got the restaurant not open, but the food box—big time, I'm assuming. I mean, I started filling up my food box with more groceries this year.

Mariam: Exactly. So yeah, the restaurant is currently not operational as the restaurant, but the space is still functional. So in the beginning of the pandemic we did a collaboration with Lifespin where it was—we called it Equal Harvest, but really it was just a community food box program. So people could sign up through Lifespin, and On the Move was helping facilitate, providing these food boxes, to folks who didn't have the means to get their groceries.

Molly: Lifespin is a charity that works toward finding strategic solutions to the systemic problem of poverty. Their programs are geared towards enhancing the lives of low-income families through education, advocacy, and community building. You start to see the collaboration at work here. There is a strong sense of community in London, and local food systems, as we're seeing, exemplify this. Getting back to On the Move Organics' pandemic response, though...

Mariam: And then as well, the actual business—we got really busy. And again, just recognizing that folks really wanted the comfort of being able to just order groceries and have it delivered to them, but really wanted to focus on local and sustainable and consciously-sourced food.

It definitely was—there were a lot of challenges along the way, of just the supply chain issue, and the lack of framework, of just this huge surge in business, and not knowing how long it was going to last and, you know, all of these questions and like, how can we really prepare for something that is so, (word of the year) unprecedented? And yeah, they—we, and they—did such a great job in adapting to all of that, and it wasn't perfect, but it was a damn good job.

Molly: And I think the more people—what I've always loved about food boxes, especially like a local food box, is that you get stuff, and then you have this sort of fun challenge of like, what do I do with this, how does this work?

Mariam: Yeah, one of the things that I love about On the Move is we are—we/they, it's all the same; I'm still emotionally working there. It's this excitement about food. You know, like, I really hope that when we're, like, really jazzed about peaches, it's because we truly are, and that kind of translates to our customers. But yeah, we'll get these, like—we got cucamelons and also kind of like mouse melons. We got, we get these fun things that it's like, okay, and what do we do with them? And like, part of my role as a communications person was like, what are the fun recipes that I can share with people that are in line with keeping things local, and them not having to go and get a bunch of other ingredients, but just really celebrating the food for what it is. So yeah, it was super fun.

Molly: Mm hmm. And I think on a growing level, it's uncertain times in a growing season, because the weather's wacky. You know, diversification is great. And diversification of what you eat is healthy, and interesting and also great. So, I wonder if that's another sort of silver lining of, you know, these—what are these tiny kiwis that came from Ontario?

Mariam: Grown in Putnam, but they taste like kiwis; they're wild! But yeah, reinvigorating the love of food, I think is an important part in food service security and food sustainability, because if you're just eating to eat, or if you're not really caring, it's harder to get that investment and like the Community Investment, in the folks growing in your community, and in the supply chain in your own community. Because if you're apathetic, I mean, are you really going to put the time or the effort or the money into it? Probably not. So creating that excitement is, I think, a vital part of it.

Molly: And are you seeing that reinvigoration/love of food locally?

Mariam: I think so, yeah. Even with the number of people who were so excited to come to the farm for Urban Roots and you know, explore what we were growing. And yeah, the people who were interested in the new and exciting varieties that On The Move was offering, the curiosity was definitely there, which is really exciting. And curiosity in adults and in kids, like, you know, you want that to be a generational thing—like that excitement about food, that care about food.

Molly: I get that. I remember trying starfruit at school as a kid, how exciting it was to eat this new fruit I'd never seen before. And I remember eating a fresh passion fruit in Ecuador as an adult and being floored by the new flavor and texture, and the ripeness. There's something special about truly fresh, not imported produce. There's also comfort in being able to find and cook with the fruits and vegetables of one's own cultural background, whether that be Iranian, Egyptian or Haudenosuane. There are so many reasons that diversification in the local food system is a good thing. Is it happening? It seems to be. For example, not many people know that Ontario has become the largest North American producer of ginseng.

According to the Ontario Federation of Agriculture, as of 2017, Ontario farmers were producing more than 200 different agricultural products. The federation surveyed 402 of its members that year, and found that 20% had tried a new crop in the last five years. The main reasons farmers chose to try a new specialty or non-traditional crop included; changing markets and emerging opportunities, crop rotation and environmental benefits, and reducing overall risk through diversification. So some farmers are looking towards diversification as a possible path to resiliency, as the climate and weather conditions change. I asked Mariam for her thoughts on climate change, as paired with the recent challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mariam: Just, I mean, the food supply has been such a concern since the pandemic started—like imports and things like that. When the pandemic started and the Root Cellar closed down, I started working and doing communications for On The Move. And just seeing the struggles in our business, trying to access the food and the supply chain. You know, we would order things and then our delivery would come and they would just be like, “We didn't have it. We couldn't get it.” That, coupled with the extreme weather that we've been having, having such an impact on the growing season for farmers, and you know, our peaches, which are personally my favorite. I wait all year for them. I have a tattoo of this particular from this particular farm. But the trees this year, with like—in the spring there was that late frost, and then that heat wave, and then the drought, and then all that rain. So the trees were still able to produce fruit, but they were just so much smaller. However, the cost of producing it was the same, if not more. So then we had these peaches, they were smaller, and then you know, people being like, “Well, these are so much smaller than last year, but they're the same price.” It's like, yes. And you know, it was a piece of education that needed to happen—this is why, these were the circumstances. So yeah, recognizing that climate piece. But also more people were wanting to buy local because it felt safer. And, it was also an opportunity to recognize that eating locally is really viable. Growing your own food is really viable if you have the time and the means to do it.

Molly: I'd like to know how close we can get to local or regional self-sufficiency. So, what growth have you been seeing in this area?

Mariam: Yeah, I think it's definitely within reach. I mean, a lot of times we talk about how Canadian winters aren't conducive to year-round growing food that can last you for an entire year. But we have so many advancements that can be used in order to do season extension, like greenhouses, indoor growing, you know, rooftop growing. There's so many ways that we can continue to grow food throughout the winters that allows us to keep the growth more local, and to continue procuring local food all year. And then also just recognizing the importance of food preservation, like pickling and storing and proper storing, and building food literacy around those pieces. So it's definitely within reach. I think it just involves, well, an influx of money—like that is the reality, but also food literacy around how these things can be done and easily achieved.

Molly: What challenges do we face in London in terms of food security and our ability to meet more of our own food needs?

Mariam: Yeah, there's so much of it that is dependent on understanding what our food system currently looks like. And you know, the actual impacts of all these imports that are happening, or, you know, non seasonal eating, and like, what does it really mean when you're buying watermelons in December. I think it's also a lot of privilege, like not ever having to be restricted in what you're able to eat and what you're able to find in the grocery store. Like you go in, and there's just this cornucopia of selection, and you have access to absolutely everything that you could dream of.

Molly: And the local stuff is not cheaper. It's more expensive, a lot of the time.

Mariam: Exactly, yeah. And so you have this world in front of you have these exciting flavors. And then if you look at the local offerings, not only is it more expensive, but it's more limited. And you know, it's reframing that mindset of, how do you eat, how do you celebrate what's available? And how do you really focus on that, and get excited about the food that's only here for like, a period of three weeks, versus wanting strawberries year round. So I think that's a huge part of it. And like a huge barrier is just creating an understanding in the general population of, this is viable. Like, eating locally is viable, and it can be really, really exciting too, and not feeling like it's a restriction, not being able to access the things that they want to.

And then yeah, price point is a huge one. And price perception as well. Obviously, for folks who are facing barriers, the price—that is the price, like it's the price that's the barrier. But also price perception and, you know, understanding the cost of food is huge as well. You're going into the grocery store, not understanding what it takes. Like, there is no such thing as cheap food; that cost is coming from somewhere. It's either coming from the migrant workers and the unpaid labour, or it's coming from the environment. So understanding that piece as well, and knowing that, yes, you're paying, like X amount more for this locally grown apple versus this important one, but this is what you're paying for, and this is why it's worth it, I think are a big piece of that as well.

Molly: So the vision for this podcast is to see London become one of Canada's greenest and most resilient Cities. Can you imagine that happening?

Mariam: Yeah. I think we can do it. I think that London is a really interesting place, because it has the dreams of a big city, but it's very community focused. And you know, if you have the community behind you, you can do so much. So there is definitely like... we can do it. We can do it. There are so many great places and people in London who are working on this.

Molly: Another person in London who's working on this, is Mike Bloxom. In addition to being owner of Suntap Technologies—which is a supplier and installer of solar energy systems and charging stations for electric vehicles—Mike sits on the City of London's advisory committee on the environment, as well as the board of Reforest London. I didn't talk to him about any of those things, though, when we met in November 2020, because in addition to all those other things, Mike Bloxom is the fresh food coordinator at the London Food Bank. And with them he's been

doing great things. Mike is responsible for receiving donations and fresh food, primarily produce, and for the distribution of the food to other agencies in London and surrounding communities. He's had this role since 2016, but has been working with the food bank much longer.

Mike: My name is Mike Bloxom, and I am the fresh food coordinator at the London Food Bank.

Molly: And you've been here for some time now.

Mike: Well, I started volunteering here in 1999, as part of a high school service club initiative, and I stuck around. So I started on Saturday mornings, and I did Saturday mornings right up until 2016, when I was hired on in this position.

Molly: The Food Bank runs a variety of fresh food and food rescue programs. Community Harvest is the oldest. Established in 2010, this program allows London and region farmers to donate produce to the Food Bank in exchange for a tax credit. When Mike started as fresh food coordinator, the Community Harvest program was responsible for 95% of the fresh produce donations the food bank received. It's still responsible for almost half of total fresh produce donations—202,000 pounds worth in 2019.

Mike: So Community Harvest is the collection of leftover food or no.2 produce, or excessive stock that farmers have.

Molly: Farm donations typically include more perishable greenhouse-grown produce, like peppers, tomatoes and cucumbers, as well as squash in the fall and rutabaga in early winter.

Mike: Either the farmer arranges to deliver it to the food bank, or we take one of our vehicles and go pick it up. And if it's more than, say, 10 skids, then we typically arrange through Feed Ontario to distribute it to other food banks as well, because we certainly can't go through 10 skids of produce ourselves. So what we then do is, they arrange with the trucking and the distribution that way. Some farms just simply have too much in their field, and they're open to us also going and doing what we call a harvest mob, where we would get a group of volunteers to go out to a farm. In the early days, there were green beans and garlic picking and that sort of thing. In recent years, we've mostly done strawberries and squash.

Molly: Being part of a harvest mob sounds like a fun, community-building volunteer opportunity. And Community Harvest seems like a great program for both the farmers and the food bank. The program is also a win for the environment. Mike estimates that in the first 10 years of the program, the food bank collected almost 2.5 million pounds of produce that would otherwise have gone to waste. This equates to the offset of roughly 2200 tonnes of carbon dioxide.

Mike: So we talked about food waste, just keeping stuff out of landfill, etc., but it's that carbon output at the end—because there was all the carbon input to grow the food, and then just to waste it, you're wasting it on both ends. But at least if it's consumed, it's no longer wasted, right. So it's just.. that's a number that kind of blew me away, was, we're like in the megaton range

now, of carbon dioxide avoidance, thanks to all these food rescue programs that we've been conducting over the last 10 years or so.

Molly: Yeah, the more loops we can close, the better.

Mike: That's right.

Molly: So the Community Harvest program has been a big success, as has the Community Refresh program. In Community Refresh, grocery stores and the food bank work together to save food from going to waste. This program kicked off in the spring of 2017 with one Real Canadian Superstore location. In the fall of that year, through Feed Canada, the London Food Bank started a pilot program with Metro, collecting primarily bread and meat.

Mike: And over the years that's grown and expanded. We partnered with the City of London to create this Community Refresh program that includes at least over 20 stores in the city now. So it's both Superstores, both Loblaws, the United Supermarket on Adelaide Street, and a handful of Food Basics stores as well. So we're collecting, basically—it's mostly perishables we're getting from them. So again, produce, meat, bread, the occasional dairy and eggs, and sometimes frozen items. So all they have to do is, anything that can be frozen: on or before the best before date they throw it in their freezer, and we come pick it up; then we can distribute it. It's quite amazing how keen these grocery stores are to get on board with diverting the stuff that they can't sell. Meanwhile, knowing it's perfectly good food, that's why we call it food rescue, because you're rescuing food that is still completely edible, but it's just it's just unsellable for whatever reason. So instead of going to landfill and producing greenhouse gases from the the breakdown of their product, it comes to us and helps people who are experiencing poverty.

Molly: In 2020 over 500,000 pounds of produce was diverted from landfill because of the Community Refresh program. And Mike said the food would have gone to landfill, and not a municipal composting program, because London doesn't have a green bin program yet. But we'll visit that topic in another episode.

Another initiative of the London Food Bank is called Plant a Row, Grow a Row. Gardeners are encouraged to grow an extra row of vegetables to donate to the London Food Bank. The pandemic summer of 2020 saw a boom for this program. Donations went from 1150 pounds in 2019 to 3600 pounds in 2020.

Mike: So I think that's a combination of more people being at home during the pandemic, and growing their own stuff, and learning how to garden—in some cases for the first time. And going, oh, I guess I only need two tomato plants, not five. But it's been good, because people have known to bring it to us as opposed to just letting it fall in their garden.

Molly: Gardeners who haven't intentionally planted extra rows for Plant a Row, Grow a Row, also donate their excess produce to the food bank, and so the farmers market vendors with unsold produce at market's close. Other fresh food donations come from Feed Ontario, which

donates things like root vegetables and melons, sister agencies who have more than they can use, and food drives, where individuals purchase and donate fresh food. As if all those donation programs weren't enough, the London Food Bank is also doing more and more growing on-site. Mike showed me around so I could see the gardening projects for myself.

Molly: Just had a tour, I've seen the new hoop house, the raised beds, where they'll be in-ground gardens next year, the food forest—all these things that are happening right here on the property of the food bank, which is so exciting. So tell me a bit more about all that.

Mike: We did start some raised bed gardens in 2015, for a few reasons. The soil here is safe to grow in, it is just not very nice soil. It's very sandy and gravelly, and so we built some raised beds, filled them with good soil, and that sustained us for a couple years. And then we added a couple more in 2017. And then in 2019, we still had those six beds but then we also used pretty much all available land behind our main warehouse building to grow nearly 2000 pounds of food in one growing season, which was just fantastic. There were a couple of really keen volunteers who were here, probably literally every day. And then we would bring in other volunteers to help them. So there'd be kind of volunteers on shifts, who would come and help. And then we're in the process right now of adding eight more raised beds. We've kind of put our raised bed gardens in its own area, and then we're going to use whatever available land we have around the hoop house and in that area to grow directly in the ground again next year.

Molly: What will go in the hoop house?

Mike: Well, I believe the number is 50,000 plants are going to be in that hoop house. It is a 2000 square foot building, I believe. We're expecting it'll grow at least double what we had in 2019. So on that same footprint, or half the footprint of what we had, we're expecting double in there, so probably 4000 pounds or so will come out of that hoop house on its own.

Molly: Wow. Of fresh, locally grown, healthy vegetables.

Mike: Yeah. That's right.

Molly: That's fantastic. And then there's composting back there, too?

Mike: Yes. So we have... oh, I've lost count. We had a volunteer step forward this spring and say, "I'd really like to organize your composting area," because we just kind of had three or four of the black compost stations back there, and they were overflowing, and they were just not really organized very well. So he kind of just tore everything down, started building compost units out of pallets, and then also brought in more of the black composters for us. So we've got a really good system back there now, where we're putting mulch in and doing everything appropriately, because before we were just kind of—we weren't really caring for it very well. Now we have that knowledge from the very keen volunteer.

Molly: Keep it hot and moving.

Mike: Yeah, exactly.

Molly: Nice. Yeah, all that is so great. Have I got all the stuff on-site?

Mike: Well, we have our food forest as well. So we started planting some fruit trees in 2017. We did 20 trees in that planting, and then another eight trees came the following year. As a result of the construction this year though, we had to move those eight trees to new spots and unfortunately we've lost a couple to weather or to pests. So our goal is to keep expanding that food forest now that we have kind of a designated area for it. So we're looking at some permaculture practices to make sure it is a full food forest—not just a fruit orchard, but kind of a complete food system with other food plants in and around the trees.

Molly: Huh. Well, that's exciting.

Mike: That's a little farther down the line. We want the trees to get a little bigger first.

Molly: Right, they're just saplings are they now?

Mike: Yeah, yeah.

Molly: And tell me what—you have some pawpaws back there.

Mike: We have some pawpaws. I can't wait to taste one someday.

Molly: Yeah, they'll line up for getting those. I'm sure there's lots of people that have never had them. And then there's also a variety...

Mike: We have varieties of pear and apple, serviceberry, nannyberry and plum, currently. But we're looking at getting some other fruit varieties and maybe even some nut trees as well.

Molly: Right. Are you okay with sharing with the wildlife?

Mike: Of course. Yeah. That's to be expected when you're growing any type of food.

Molly: Yeah. Great. Has there been any talk of doing, you know, in the way that people bring in their garden bonus produce with the Plant a Row, Grow a Row, but people who have fruit trees who are not using all those apples or pears or what have you?

Mike: We've had people bring in crops from their own backyard, or wherever they happen to know there's a fruit tree or pear tree, apple tree. We've had a lot of that brought in, mostly in September, October. But yeah. It's encouraging that people know that that's an option, right? They're not just leaving food to rot on the ground. They're bringing it to us to get distributed.

Molly: And um, I mean, I'm impressed. I don't know much about food banks in general, but the London Food Bank seems like it's doing amazing programming around all of those things. How do you measure up to other food banks in Ontario and beyond, in terms of those fresh food programs?

Mike: Well, 2018, I think it was August, was the first time we hit 50% fresh food donations. And at that time, we believed it to be a first in Ontario for a food bank. Other food banks have hit that mark since. I don't have any hard data on that. And nationally, I think other food banks are doing that now as well. It's just, it took a long time for...I think food banks, as well as the general public—to wrap their head around perishables being able to be donated, because people think of food banks, they often think of a canned food drive. Whereas we have the capacity—we have the refrigeration and freezer space—to accept any sort of perishable donation. And after, you know, word kind of got out, between the farmers and the grocery stores, it's really become kind of half of what we bring in each year.

Molly: Of course, how well the London Food Bank measures up isn't just about impressive numbers. It's about giving real people—the food bank's clients—good food to eat in a challenging time.

Mike: People come here on an emergency basis, so giving them non perishable food, canned items, whatever, might not sound ideal, but it's getting them through that tough period. But if we're able to give them local—which is often the case with what comes from the farmers, or from our own gardens—the clients really appreciate it. About 70% of our clients come four or fewer times in a year. So it really is an emergency situation when they're coming to us. They're not coming here looking for a handout. They're coming here because it's either pay for the groceries or pay for the rent. And if we can give them—it used to be, we used to say it was three to four days of an emergency food supply, but with all this extra produce, and all this other fresh stuff that we're able to add, we're probably closer to six or seven days of emergency food. So that's one week they don't have to spend on groceries, and they can help make ends meet until whatever emergency their suffering improves in their lives.

Molly: The London Food Bank supports clients not only by providing food, but also by providing education about foods people may not be familiar with, or may not have cooked with before.

For food items that clients don't typically have access to, the food bank sometimes even provides recipe cards explaining what the item is and how it can be prepared. Mike gave the example of a donation of jicama, which is a central American root vegetable similar to a potato, and how volunteers were able to share information to clients about this item. The food bank's processes offer multiple benefits—using local food and diverting it from waste, and also building community and food literacy, by sharing knowledge.

Molly: Mike is a strong proponent of London's Urban Agriculture Strategy, which was passed by City Council in 2017. The hoop house that the London Food Bank erected involved zoning

changes, and the Urban Agriculture Strategy's guidance meant that what would have been a \$20,000 fee for those changes, was waived by the City in support of urban agriculture.

Mike: That was a really collaborative process of getting that strategy developed. And I don't know all the ins and outs of it, but ways that London can get more resilient is definitely encouraging more of that local food growth. So getting homeowners or property owners of commercial, industrial land or whatever, growing food on site. And there's so much just grass everywhere, and grass is the worst thing in the world. There's that movement food not lawns, right. I think that's kind of the goal we have to get towards, where yes, grass has its place—in parks and play spaces and that sort of thing. But there is just too much of it where it's just put down, but then it has to be maintained. With lawn mowers. Whereas if you put food there, it can be maintained by people with pruning shears. But generally, local food production is paramount. That's something we really have to get a handle on in London and, well, everywhere. The whole idea of importing stuff from California half the year is really not sustainable, especially with a lot of the practices that are involved in, you know, the monocultures, say almonds or that sort of thing. I could go on and on. But, locally I think that there just needs to be more encouragement, for people to do their own planting at home or at their place of business.

Molly: Yeah, and I think too, we have—with the pandemic, with climate change—the possibilities of food insecurity increase. With the forest fires in California, with all these things. All of it points towards being more self-sufficient.

Mike: Precisely.

Molly: And I think too, in a lot of environmental issues, in areas, it's hard to look too hard at what's going on, 'cause it's really depressing. And I find with food there's a lot of reason to be excited and hopeful. Would you agree with that?

Mike: Absolutely.

Molly: Alright, well onwards and upwards. Thank you so much Mike.

Mike: OK. Thank you, Molly.

Molly: I really do feel optimistic. I think that the London Food Bank is doing great things for the community around food security and sustainability. I think the Forest City Workers Co-Op and Urban Roots are doing great things. And there are so many other groups doing great things around local food and urban agriculture in London. We'll hear about some more of those in the next episode, when I talk with Gabor Sass, so the story's not over yet. But so far, how's it looking? Could London become self-sufficient? Food secure? Food sovereign? The local food system is vast and complex—from large scale farm operations to sprouts in a jar on your counter. I really only scratched the surface, but still so much points to our ability to get much closer, and suggests that we are getting much closer to feeding ourselves. In terms of being green and resilient among other Canadian cities, I haven't found the data yet that says who's

the most self-sufficient, food secure, food sovereign. And I'm kind of okay with that actually. I know, comparing London to other cities is part of what this podcast set out to do, but the challenges and the growing conditions across the country are so varied, and there is so much good happening in so many places. We are following each other's leads and working in our own communities to make healthy food more available for more people. I want London to keep working on that, to follow other communities' leads, and ultimately, to be a leader. So stay tuned. Lets see how far we can go.

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