

# north shore news

## JAMES: Loutet Farm engages community

Elizabeth James, contributing writer

April 29, 2015 10:28 AM

Just  
**ASKING**  
Elizabeth James



*"Loutet Farm is very important to me. I was born and raised in the community yet have never felt so connected, or like I had a place in the community until I began volunteering at the farm."*

— Christina Hutchinson, Loutet Farm volunteer

On a day when cold winds and heavy rain were carpeting neighbourhood gardens with pink cherry blossoms, master farmer Gavin Wright agreed to update me on the 2015 plans for Loutet Farm and the Edible Garden Project.

So, sheltered in a small shed and separated from an educational workshop happening under a marquee tent a few feet away, we began to chat.

For those of you not yet familiar with the farm, Gavin says the idea arose out of a think-tank initiative of the School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture at the University of British Columbia.

In common with a growing awareness of the need for food security throughout North America, the folks at SALA had noticed the amount of Vancouver's city-owned land that was lying empty and set about putting some of it to good use growing local produce in community gardens.

In 2005, as the "edible gardens" idea caught on and began to spread, North Shore Neighbourhood House, the City of North Vancouver and others partnered with UBC to transform a gravel- and weed-covered half-acre at Loutet Park into a thriving community garden at Rufus Avenue and East 14th Street.

Close to a quiet residential area and adjacent to the beautiful flower garden wrought out of a similar patch of tough weeds by nonagenarian Gerry McPherson, the farm and several beehives built by North Vancouverite Ric Erikson are ideal neighbours for the students and staff of Brooksbank elementary.

But the Edible Garden Project is so much more than the sum of those parts. An integral part of the community in every sense of the word, the farm's activities have grown exponentially.

Gavin, project manager Emily Jubenvill, education co-ordinator Jason Mertz and an enthusiastic team of volunteers have brought Loutet to the forefront as a North Shore source for locally grown organic food. They also engage the community with good old-fashioned potluck meals, volunteer training and horticultural education for young and old.

### The Farm

Loutet is a social enterprise farm, as is the newly built market garden on the grounds of Sutherland secondary that is being supervised by farmer Holly Rooke.

"Social enterprise farms provide fresh, organic vegetables to people in the neighbourhood and must generate revenue to be independent of outside funding," Gavin said.

"Loutet is the only social enterprise the EGP operates which is why it's called a farm rather than a garden; all the other EGP programs are reliant on grants and donations," he explained.

Loutet's farm-gate sales are held Wednesdays 4-6 p.m. and Saturdays from 10 a.m. to noon.

### Education

As Gavin and I chatted, we heard education co-ordinator Jason Mertz explaining to shivering workshop attendees that the success of an edible garden is in direct proportion to the nutritional health of the soil.

"Soil, soil, SOIL!" he emphasized. (I have a sneaking suspicion he was also reminding his listeners to say "soil" not "dirt" when referring to a garden.)

### Volunteers and farm produce

Manned largely by volunteers and a small contingent of full-time staff, the grass that took hold last winter has been weeded and the soil replenished with fresh topsoil and newly composted material. With our early spring, hundreds of strawberry plants planted through holes pierced in landscape sheeting were already showing a sturdy three inches of growth.

If the garden grows as well as it did last year, those berries will soon be followed by lettuce, arugula, radishes, broccoli, raspberries, spinach, kale, Brussels sprouts, turnips, carrots and many more nutritious and delicious fresh veggies.

So what happens to these goodies?

Gavin says crew members sell all they can — including honey from the beehives — to customers who come to farm-gate sales throughout the season. That helps the farm break even.

"If anything's left at the end of the day, or we have the occasional over-abundant crop, we send surplus veggies to the North Shore Neighbourhood House food hub where, along with produce from 12 EGP 'sharing gardens' on the North Shore, it is shared with those most in need.

What could be better on a cold and wet day than to see happy volunteers moving wheelbarrow loads of mulch onto the garden and to make friends with a man I've often seen hard at work as I've passed by the farm on my daily walks — and to learn much more than expected about a healthy and extremely worthwhile endeavour.

*After 16 years with the multi-disciplinary Perinatal Programme of B.C. and later in various endeavours in the growing high-tech industry, Elizabeth James now connects the dots every second Wednesday on local, regional and provincial issues. She can be reached via email at [rimco@shaw.ca](mailto:rimco@shaw.ca) (<mailto:rimco@shaw.ca>).*

*What are your thoughts? Send us a letter via email by clicking [here \(http://www.nsnews.com/opinion/send-us-a-letter\)](http://www.nsnews.com/opinion/send-us-a-letter) or post a comment below.*

© 2015 North Shore News