

LEARNING TO FARM DURING THE PANDEMIC

Martha New Growers experience of 2020 season



The Sisters of St. Martha are committed to sharing values and resources with youth, to empowering and developing people, as well as to living in right relationship with the land. In keeping with these values, Martha Justice Ministry entered in partnership with established organic gardeners, Jen and David Greenberg, who became managers and mentors of the **Martha New Growers Program**. Every spring since 2013, young, energetic people come to the fields on the Bethany Property, roll their sleeves up and begin the hard work of “learning by doing” farming. The goal is to gain experience and confidence in small scale market gardening. Throughout the season, they learn how to manage vegetable production that is economically viable and environmentally friendly.



Sr. BrendaLee Boisvert and Olivia Gowan signing Martha New Growers agreement

Olivia Gowan (25) and Andrew McGillicuddy (26) signed the documents to become the newest Martha New Growers in February 2020. What appealed to them was the independence of the program and low risk involved. Being avid self-learners turned out to be an extremely important asset in 2020. They had just placed an order for seeds and were into crop planning, when the world came to a grinding halt as the COVID-19 pandemic forced a lockdown, keeping people in home quarantine and closing businesses. The growers were allowed to continue their work, but their mentors could only be available to them virtually and there were no extra hands on the property to help with strenuous physical tasks.



Olivia and Andrew, Martha New Growers for 2020



For Andrew, the most challenging aspect of the program was the very steep learning curve. He was very new to farming and, because the pandemic made the outside support less accessible, he had to learn fast! He also put a bit more stress on his partner who had past farming experience. But Olivia had never been given an opportunity to tackle such tasks as, for example, crop planning! She found 'being her own boss' the biggest challenge of the program. For both, learning to deal with different weather conditions, was the most difficult.



"Every day we had to figure out what we do and is this the best we can do it or could this be better..." ~Olivia



"At first, it was a little stressful just trying to figure things out. We had to remind ourselves a lot that we were here to learn and ground ourselves that way! We kept saying: okay, we are not supposed to be good at this yet, we're not supposed to be perfect, this all about learning!" ~Olivia



"Usually the program is quite isolated which is the 'real life' experience that you want. But when we were just the only group up here there was a lot of pressure, a lot of stress... having to put the hoop houses up by ourselves...! But it all worked out and then it bettered us because we now know we can do it on our own!" ~Andrew



"You are on top of a hill here ... when we first put up these hoop houses, it was stressful going to bed every night, especially when we knew there was going to be a windstorm... Are they going to be standing in the morning? Did we build them right? Did we get a dump of snow on top of them? How to clear it off?" ~Andrew





What was most surprising about your experience?

Andrew: "Things grew!"

Olivia: "We did it!"



The Sisters are always walking around the grounds and encouraging us and telling us "You guys are such hard workers!", "Keep going!" and "Food's so good!"



This winter, Olivia is going back to school to study agriculture and Andrew will be working with livestock. They are hoping these new experiences will give them more knowledge to make their farming future. The long-term plan is to invest in a piece of land to build their own complex agroecosystem with many species interacting. But it will not be just about producing and selling food. The integral part of their dream is to incorporate some form of education for the community. As for the format, there are many ideas: one-on-one farming instruction, hands-on workshops for high school students, career days to show that farming is a viable way of living, assistance with school gardens and anything else that will help getting the community involved in growing food!



When asked what was life-giving about their experience, they both mention support from the Sisters, David and Jen Greenberg who, despite the distance, were able to give them helpful feedback. And they are also grateful to the community of Antigonish and other growers in the area who would ask regularly how they were doing or simply come up and invite them over. It was encouraging to know that if they ever needed help, they could reach out for the support of the community of experienced farmers. They also received tremendous help from their families.

Olivia and Andrew feel lucky to have had support of so many people as well as each other. They are reassured knowing their relationship withstood the force of the pandemic and uncertainty it brought on, the stress of dealing with the capricious Maritime weather, and the intensive physical labor involved in farming. They are grateful to the Sisters of St. Martha for providing the opportunity to participate in the New Growers Program and for making it possible to continue safely during this strange growing season. It was an experience of a lifetime; one they will benefit from for many years to come.



Our families came up several times to help out on the farm just because they wanted to and that really made us feel good, it empowered us, made us want to keep going and work as hard as we could. ~ Olivia



Just working with Olivia was special. I was worried at the beginning how is this working with your partner all day going to work ... sometimes we worked opposite ends of the field but most of the time it was wonderful, and it did work out! ~ Andrew

