

# CASE STUDY: ROOTS TO HARVEST

*Contributions to the emergence  
of the Northern Ontario resilient  
and connected food hub*

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## Roots to Harvest

### Social Innovation

Roots to Harvest (R2H) is an innovative non-profit charitable organization committed to immersing youth in the local food growing, processing and distribution systems. As a socially innovative food-based non-profit, R2H:

- Provides paid work opportunities for marginalized youth to learn about seed-to-plate food production while gaining skills and experiences that open doors to diverse job opportunities and helps to build their capacity for sustainable livelihoods;
- Incorporates local food from their own production, as well as those of other area producers in value-added products, meals at local high schools, and fundraising activities;
- Participates in community service work with youth interns at local area farms, food processors and food security agencies (food banks, shelters);
- Increases the capacity of Thunder Bay schools and community gardens to grow food through improved access to education, training, demonstration, and northern hearty vegetable transplants;
- Demonstrates that a vibrant and multi-functional urban agriculture space is possible, and that growing food in a northern environment is beautiful, bountiful and inspirational.

### Overview

Roots to Harvest (R2H) is a non-profit social enterprise organization that has been delivering exceptional youth programming in Northwestern Ontario since 2007. Driven by an experienced and passionate team of experiential educators and community builders, Roots to Harvest is a community-minded grassroots organization.

Roots to Harvest started with a Ministry of Research and Innovation grant awarded to the Food Security Research Network to cover operations from 2007-2010. This project involved Northwestern Ontario youth in the science of food issues, with a long term goal of addressing the region's food security. The initial three year grant laid the foundation for serving high-risk youth and engaging the community in the youth's participation in food activities. With additional support

from the Food Security Research Network, R2H was able to expand their program offerings with additional staff and launch the Urban Youth Garden.

Building on the success of the three year YSTOP grant, Roots to Harvest achieved charitable status in 2012. They currently operate with a small team of two to three full-time and seasonal staff, 5 part-time youth interns from September through May, and a nine-member working Board of Directors providing strategic direction. Funding is a mixture of government grants (including internships and wage subsidies), private/corporate sponsorship, fundraising and Ontario Trillium Foundation support.

R2H has a small office space and has an agreement to program and produce on two “in kind” urban farming plots representing approx. 1.25 acres within the City of Thunder Bay. The larger of the two plots is privately owned, and has been developed in annual vegetables and fruits. It also houses 2-3 bee hives, rabbits and a small greenhouse. The smaller plot is City of Thunder Bay property, and Roots to Harvest developed it into a small food forest featuring fruit trees, berries, and perennial forest foods such as fiddle heads and mushrooms.

R2H brings food cycle production ideas and information to the broader community, to school groups, and to the agricultural community. Urban and rural areas are worked in a complementary fashion, so as to enhance the understanding of the food cycle process. Ultimately though, Roots to Harvest is about young people. The organization uses food as a tool to connect meaningfully with youth by building their skills, resiliency and their sense of contribution and connection to the community. Roots to Harvest’s tag line is *Punks Growing Food*.

Roots to Harvest works intentionally to connect young people to the local food system in three main ways:

#### 1. Youth Employment

Roots to Harvest’s urban farm grows a variety of vegetables and fruits. In the summer, Roots to Harvest hires up to ten young people who face barriers to employment, aged 15-18, to work during July and August through a partnership with YES Employment. Summer intern youth are trained and mentored to help plan, grow, tend, harvest, cook, prepare, and sell foods from the urban farm setting. Produce is sold at the urban farm on “market” days, and also via mobile (bicycle run) markets. Excess produce is also used for local meal preparation at high school cafeterias and/or donated to local food distribution agencies. R2H also tends two bee hives on site, and has experimented with caring for breeding rabbits, and raising tilapia fish.

Youth interns also work with area farmers to learn about other aspects of food production including animal stewardship, infrastructure projects and

maintenance, and other food-related initiatives (like bee keeping). With food as its foundation, the urban youth garden and summer internship program cultivates leadership, resiliency, confidence, and a sense of place for youth participants.

During the school year, five to seven of the summer youth stay on to work part-time with Roots to Harvest, in the Academic Year Program (AYP). AYP serves to anchor the summer experience with the youth as they transition back into school and the more familiar phases of their day to day lives. It provides a connection to positive and meaningful work, and lets the Roots to Harvest staff continue to act as mentors, advocates and resources for the youth who work in the AYP.

## 2. Secondary Schools Programming:

Roots to Harvest partners with educators in the high schools and alternative education programs to provide ongoing experiential classroom programming related to food. Roots to Harvest works collaboratively with teachers and administrators to identify opportunities and deliver programs that enhance learning opportunities through meaningful, hands on projects, with an emphasis on the workplace and applied level classes. Some of the programs include: aquaponics, seed-saving, canning and preserving, local food menu planning and preparation, and schoolyard food production in gardens and greenhouses. R2H currently works with two high schools on Thunder Bay's north side.

## 3. Community Outreach/Service:

R2H incorporates a community service component that is fundamental to R2H's philosophy and a key reason that the organization has been so successful and had such a strong impact on the local community. Community service at R2H involves youth actively participating in projects related to food, such as preparing meals at the local shelter, offering produce at discounted prices in low income neighbourhoods, and donating vegetables to a woman's shelter. Community service reinforces networks and relationships in the community and has a lasting positive impact on the social development of the young people participating.

Through partnerships with youth programs, food aid organizations, events and other community programs, Roots to Harvest reaches hundreds of community members each year. Community outreach takes the form of programming and workshops (garden starting, seed saving, cooking) and having a presence at events to engage community members in local and sustainable food growing such as Seedy Saturday and Savour Superior.

## **Impact & Benefits**

R2H makes food more accessible in an urban area. Most farms operate on large spaces far from the eye of the average consumer, and usually too far for young

people to develop a real connection to food and farming. Roots to Harvest operates a large urban garden downtown Thunder Bay that is easily accessible by foot, bike, bus or car. It's a beautifully designed, warm and welcoming space that is highly visible and regularly accessed by the community.

Roots to Harvest works to bring the importance of real food, knowledge of the local food economy, as well as practical food tips (i.e. easy to cook meals) to students in secondary schools. R2H delivers workshops in classes and facilitates local "Farm to Café" meals with products from local producers. Students love these initiatives as they learn so much about where their food comes from and how to participate more meaningfully in the local food economy.

*Roots to Harvests' mandate is to provide meaningful and impactful employment, education and mentorship opportunities within the local food system for young people who face barriers to success. We work to educate and inspire the youth within our community about small-scale agriculture, food security and our local food system. We collaborate with educators in the secondary school system to deliver innovative food engagement projects that are grounded in the Ontario curriculum and contribute to the local food system.*

*Though the content of our programs centre around sustainable local food systems, the impact we strive to make in the community is with people, especially high school aged youth. Through hands on experiential programming and expert facilitation, we engage with youth who are not thriving within the traditional classroom or employment setting. With this approach, Roots to Harvest teaches skills and facilitates self-reflection, while improving the employability, resilience and independence of youth and strengthening communities in and around Thunder Bay.*

To give a sense of the impact of this small grassroots organization, in 2014, Roots to Harvest:

- Hired ten summer interns and five Academic Year Program interns;
- Grew 35 different varieties of vegetables and fruits, tended two bee hives (producing 200 lbs of honey), cared for two breeding rabbits during the summer, raised 25 tilapia fish, planted 25 fruit trees and 30 berry bushes and other wild edibles.
- Worked on 25 projects at 8 area farms;
- Participated in 24 urban markets including 12 mobile markets;
- Cooked and served 1300 'Farm to Café' meals at 4 local high schools;
- Delivered over 50 programs in local high school classrooms;
- Donated over 500 lbs of produce to local food service organizations (Shelter House, Regional Food Distribution Association);
- Donated 30 produce baskets to the local women's shelter;
- Helped prepare and serve 8 meals (1600 individuals) at food service

- organizations;
- Prepared multiple value-added products (honey, granola, pumpkin pies, gift baskets, etc.) for sale;
  - Attended over 10 events in support of the local food system;
  - Hosted over 80 volunteers on different community projects;
  - Facilitated 5 students to gain co-op credit in high schools;
  - Built over 500<sup>2</sup> feet of school garden space; and
  - Trained 7 new urban bee keepers.

R2H has an extremely strong, interwoven network of reciprocal relationships within the community. They work with youth, schools, community groups, private businesses and restaurants to bring youth closer to the food system. R2H provides mentorship, training and tangible experience to young people, but brings it full circle by ensuring that the youth also actively participate in giving back with their time to the broader community. (The “many hands make light work” approach.)

Roots to Harvest was awarded the ‘Mayors Community Safety Award’ in 2014, and has been rated the Best Grassroots Organizations in Thunder Bay Walleye magazine’s Annual Readers’ Poll.

## **Opportunities for Growth**

Roots to Harvest has successfully managed a number of organizational growth ‘spurts’ from start up to incorporation, to obtaining charitable status in 2012. In 2014, Roots to Harvest obtained their own office space and now has a more visible presence in the community. Alongside these changes, Roots to Harvest has been able to bring on additional staff and provide more, and longer-term, employment opportunities for youth and staff.

R2H continues to expand the types of programming available to local area producers, food security organizations and institutions like high-school cafeterias. Roots to Harvest focuses on the facilitator role between producer/institution and youth/community.

R2H would like to expand the breadth and depth of their unique urban food gardens and programming including expanding their urban garden spaces, building a much larger greenhouse to enable seed starting, seed-saving and storage capabilities, and extending employment training opportunities to young people who are not eligible for post-secondary schools or programs.

## Challenges & Limitations

The biggest threat to Roots to Harvests' viability, as with most non-profit organizations, is the issue of ongoing core funding. They are working hard on a sustainability plan to continue playing an integral role in the community. Roots to Harvest has set a target to have only 40% of their total annual budget come from government and other granting programs, with the majority (60%) of revenue coming from direct sales and services, fundraising and donations.

Another challenge is the time commitment involved in facilitating the relationships between producer and institution (secondary schools). Fulfillment practices with institutions are complicated and administratively burdensome. At the same time, operational practices at the producer level can either help or hinder business transactions with school institutions. R2H has found a key role in the facilitation of these two food system players, but this role is not currently funded by the schools. Without funding for their time, R2H cannot continue to offer this service. As a result, the future of these food producer/school relationships is unknown.

## Visions for the Future

Roots to Harvest is currently developing strategies to ensure the long term sustainability of the organization. As a youth development organization working within the local food community, R2H is uniquely positioned to harness the enthusiasm for local food and ecological education to generate revenue through direct sales and services, fundraising and donations.

R2H would like to expand their presence in urban Thunder Bay by expanding gardens, wild edibles, greenhouse production, programming and overall contributing to a more resilient food hub within Thunder Bay. There is ample, and growing, community and volunteer support for Roots to Harvest in the community. This is likely a result of their positive presence in the community, the hard work and dedication of staff and youth interns to support the local food economy, and the lasting impact of their efforts. Roots to Harvest plans to stay a fixture in the Thunder Bay community.

## Strategies for Success

Roots to Harvest demonstrates interconnectivity amongst youth, the food producer community and the broader community. R2H plays the critical facilitator role. Roots to Harvest's strategies for success focus on:



- *Youth engagement:* working with marginalized youth, engaging youth learning in urban and rural settings, connecting youth with community mentors, providing meaningful work and learning opportunities, and building deep and sustainable connections with others.
- *Local connections and learning opportunities:* Roots to Harvest believes it's extremely important to weave the webs of food production to the broader community by providing real life learning opportunities, projects and obstacles. Weaving this web in the community across sectors and across generations makes everyone, and the local food system, stronger.
- *Whole food system chain:* Roots to Harvest values the importance of involvement from 'seed to stomach'. Roots to Harvest believes that food is an excellent learning tool that unites people and communities together.

Roots to Harvest is a community based initiative that involves youth directly in the local food life cycle system (growing/processing/distribution). R2H builds local knowledge and capacity by mentoring to/from food producers, distributors, retailers and consumers. R2H incorporates an urban farming philosophy to bring food matters closer to home, especially for the youth they work with, youth in local secondary schools and the broader community.

Youth gain skills via direct sales (urban and mobile markets), learn about retail distributors, and work with post-secondary institutions. They are also involved in community food service work to prepare and serve food for those less fortunate. R2H youth advance through their lives with greater confidence, knowledge of/interest in/and connections to the local food economy. This interconnected, yet flexible approach benefits all parties and makes the local food hub system more diverse, more visible and more robust in Thunder Bay.

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<http://rootstoharvest.org>

