

## **Workshop aims to bring small farms back to life; About half of Langley's 940 agricultural plots under four hectares in size are fallow**

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Dozens of would-be farmers have signed up for a small-lot farming workshop in Langley, a community with about 10,000 hectares of unused farmland.

The Township of Langley is home to the most "parcelized" farmland in Metro Vancouver with nearly three-quarters of its agricultural lots under four hectares - about 940 in all. Nearly half of the township's land in the Agricultural Land Reserve is lying idle.

"With the growing consumer demand for locally produced food, we believe that there is great potential to increase production here in Langley," said workshop organizer Karen Taylor of the Langley Sustainable Agriculture Foundation. The workshop is focused on crops, products and business models suited to small-lot, humanintensive production taught by successful farmers, agrologists and researchers from Kwantlen Polytechnic University.

Workshop speaker Mark Robbins is a recently retired provincial agrologist who raises specialty poultry in Langley, an enterprise he has been building for 10 years. His farm earns about \$200,000 a year before expenses on about three hectares of land.

He throws out the old saw: "Farming as a business is a wonderful lifestyle, farming as a lifestyle is a horrible business." "You have to remember that farming is a great small or mediumsized business, but it is a business," he said.

To succeed in a small business, a farmer needs to develop markets and deliver product when the market wants to buy, he said. But you can also tailor your farm to suit the amount of time and effort you choose to put into it.

A family typically has more than one income and small-lot farming treated as a part-time job can be a significant revenue stream, he said.

"There is incredible interest in farming," said Robbins, noting that farming classes and internships at UBC and Kwantlen are full.

Recent retiree Dennis Popowich has been growing cedar hedging on his two-hectare lot in Langley for the past 35 years. He is planning to attend the workshop for tips on expanding fruit, berry and vegetable production and is already building a greenhouse to help him extend his growing season.

"I love going outside and watching things grow and looking after it," said Popowich, who grew up on an orchard in the Okanagan. "It's just really satisfying to pick fruit or berries from your own garden and cash in the rewards at the end of the year."

Between the shrubs and boarding horses, he pulls in about \$20,000 a year, but Popowich is always looking for ways to make his patch more productive.

"For me it's more out of interest than a commercial venture, but I've sold from 500 to about 2,000 cedars a year, though not so many now, it was a lot of work," he said.

"I've always been interested in getting more production from the land than just having a pasture or leaving it fallow."

The township earlier this year completed a new Agricultural Viability Strategy with the goal of reinvigorating the local farming economy and bringing idle land back into production.

Almost 6,000 hectares of ALR farmland is being used for residential purposes, according to township statistics. Another 3,500 hectares are being used as "hobby farms," mainly to keep horses.

Council endorsed the 20-year plan and its 58 recommendations to encourage farming on agricultural land in July.

The workshop is among the first concrete actions to come from that plan, according to township planner Jason Chu.

The plan also calls for farm tax reform and the development of infrastructure and regulations to enhance the viability of farming businesses.

The small lot farm workshop will be at the Langley Events Centre on Saturday, Nov. 30 at 8 a.m. To register, call 604-897-2214. Registration deadline is Nov. 22.

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Illustration:

- Ric Ernst, PNG / Dennis Popowich operates JD Cedars on his five acres in Langley and is thinking about using more of his land to grow food crops. He plans to attend an all-day workshop on small lot farming .