

Growing an industry

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About a dozen students will take part in a 32-week, full-time course to learn to farm in the Urban Teaching Farm pilot project.

Photo: Emma Davie/The Daily Gleaner

Fresh, delicious vegetables will be the secondary crop from Fredericton's new Urban Teaching Farm project.

The more prized harvest? Helping farm workers find a future in New Brunswick.

The project, unveiled last week, will use an eight-acre farm on Fredericton's northside to teach students the nuances of farming over 32 weeks. The students will work on vegetable crops, visit neighbouring farms and attend classroom lessons. An emphasis will be placed on small-scale, regenerative agricultural training. Excess vegetables will be sold at a roadside stand and through wholesale contracts.

NB Community Harvest Garden Inc. organizers hope the 12 students go on to skilled jobs on New

Brunswick farms, and perhaps someday own their own farm.

The farm project is a great idea. If successful, it could become a model for other New Brunswick teaching farms.

Although it doesn't get a lot of attention, agriculture is an economic powerhouse in New Brunswick. We are world leaders in potato and wild blueberry production, and have well-established markets for apples, vegetables, grains, maple syrup and cranberries.

There's still lots of room for growth.

Improvements in agriculture yield and a shifting demographic has left thousands of acres of viable land available for new operations. The province wants new farmers from within the province, country and around the globe.

New Brunswick has key advantages over other farming locales.

Reasonable farmland prices are crucial for new farm startups. While the price of agricultural land has grown steadily over the last decade, New Brunswick's increase has been slower than the national average.

Potatoes are the largest cash crop in New Brunswick, but there are lots of other farming opportunities. Wild blueberry acreage has expanded in coastal areas. Increased awareness of 'buy local' provides a growing market for vegetables. Small fruit crops, particularly grapes, are expanding in the southern half of the province.

Other New Brunswick growth sectors are pushing increased agricultural demand. Craft beer and wine entrepreneurs have a keen interest in buying local, ramping up demand for New Brunswick barley malt, hops and fruit juices. The legalization of recreational marijuana could be another cash crop.

Technology advancements have brought huge leaps in efficiency.

GPS tracking can pinpoint problems, allowing spot herbicide or pesticide treatment instead of widespread applications. Drones can hover over fragile crops to determine the best time to harvest. Improved weather forecasting helps farmers make crucial decisions for planting or harvesting.

The romanticized days of the traditional mixed family farm, handed down through generations, are gone. In its place will be new opportunities for hard-working, innovative New Brunswickers to make a living.

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