

Around the world, food growers are on the front lines of climate change. In British Columbia, intensive flooding and heat waves killed 1.3 million farm animals in 2021. Madagascar, Jordan and New Mexico are currently navigating severe droughts, affecting food production and raising the costs of farming.

While the challenges of climate change can feel distant, they have already hit home in Durham Region. In January 2020, regional council declared a climate emergency, noting that the area has experienced flooding, higher temperatures and the spread of vector-borne diseases. The 2019 Durham Region Agriculture Sector Climate Adaptation Strategy anticipates that a “warmer, wetter and wilder climate” will pose risks to the local agricultural sector. It cautions that livestock and grower health, crop yields, and farming infrastructure such as equipment and facilities could all be negatively affected by extreme weather. However, the strategy also points to opportunities – warmer weather could bring a longer growing season and the opportunity to produce different kinds of food.

Given that food systems are responsible for a more than a third of global greenhouse gas emissions, agriculture has the potential to be a significant contributor to the problem – or a major part of the solution. Fortunately, even on a small scale, food growing can have many positive environmental impacts.

Take, for example, a community garden. When an individual chooses to grow and eat their own food (and perhaps even preserve it to eat during the winter) they may be replacing food in their diet that would have been imported from far away. This reduction in food miles, or the distance food travels before it reaches the eater, helps cut down on greenhouse gas emissions.



As a part of green infrastructure, community gardens – along with other green spaces such as food forests and rooftop gardens – also generate many other environmental benefits. Extreme weather linked to climate change can mean greater amounts of rain that urbanized areas may not be prepared to absorb.

Gardens can help soak up stormwater runoff, reducing the risk of flooding. Durham’s Community Climate Adaptation Plan includes rain gardens among its suggestions for green infrastructure to improve the “health and resiliency of the natural environment” and to help reduce heat in urbanized areas.

Community gardens also can make productive use of organic waste through composting – a more planet-friendly approach than sending food to landfills, where it produces emissions as it decomposes. They encourage biodiversity and help reduce air pollution.

While it may not be quantifiable, community food growing also serves the vital purpose of connecting people to nature, and to one another. Durham Integrated Growers for a Sustainable Community (DIG) works with around 30 independently operated local

gardens that are bringing people together to create positive environmental impacts. The Field Community Garden, for instance, aims to create opportunities for people to learn about sustainable and traditional gardening practices and to help sustain the natural environment surrounding the garden site. The Hope Community Garden has a mission to strengthen community bonds and foster environmental stewardship.

Our actions can seem small individually, but working together, we have the chance to create a more environmentally friendly future. The next time you plant a seed in your garden or snack on a locally grown carrot, know that you’re playing a part in creating a low-carbon and climate-resilient Durham Region.