

Farming the Hydro Corridor

A guide to starting an urban farm in
Toronto's Hydro-Corridors, inspired
by Malvern Urban Farm.



Developed as part of a multi-year collaboration
between Malvern Family Resource Centre and the
Urban Just Transitions Research Cluster at the
University of Toronto Scarborough.



Malvern Family Resource Centre



This booklet aims to provide the information needed to start new hydro corridor farms across the Greater Toronto Area. It offers concrete support through the example of Malvern Urban Farm.

When referencing this guide, please cite as follows: Privitera, E., Sutherland, B., Perttula, C., and Hoffmann, M. (2026). Farming the Hydro Corridor: A guide to starting an urban farm in Toronto's Hydro-Corridors, inspired by Malvern Urban Farm.
<https://www.mfrc.org/urban-agriculture-and-food-programs>



Land Acknowledgement

We at Malvern Family Resource Centre and the University of Toronto-Scarborough Campus acknowledge that our work takes place on the traditional territories of many Indigenous nations, including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnaabe, the Haudenosaunee, and the Chippewa. These lands are governed by the Williams Treaty and Treaty 13. We recognize the role that agriculture has played in the colonization of this land, and as we push our work forward and advocate for changes to urban agriculture policy and food justice in the city, we are committed to advancing the right to Indigenous self-determination, land and food sovereignty, as well as nurturing relationships with First Nations, Metis, and Inuit peoples in Toronto and Scarborough that move us all forward together.

African Ancestral Acknowledgement

We acknowledge that people come to Canada in many ways, not all of them willingly. We acknowledge the ancestors who were brought to Canada through the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, and the descendants who are here today. We also recognize the systemic racism present in our society and food system, leading to our current situation where Black households are 3-times more likely to be food insecure than White households. We hope that through this project, we can advance food justice for Black people by drawing attention to food insecurity and providing one pathway for community-led food justice intervention through urban agriculture.



Table of Contents



	About Malvern Urban Farm	
	History of the Farm	07
	CEED Garden Program	08
	Farming in Hydro Corridors	10
	Nuts and Bolts of Starting an Urban Farm from Scratch	
	Questions to ask yourself before setting up a farm	13
	Bureaucratic steps to set up a farm in a hydro corridor	14
	Budget considerations	16
	Farm operations	18
	Abbreviations	23
	Useful Links	24
	Additional Resources	25



About Malvern Urban Farm

History of the Farm



Malvern Urban Farm is a 2-acre urban farm located in the Finch hydro corridor that supports food security and economic development in the Malvern neighbourhood. It serves as a community-friendly green space where farmers can develop business experience, grow and sell fresh produce, and help support the community's need for access to healthy, fresh, and culturally relevant food. As of 2024, it hosts 19 farmers and their families to grow over 40,000 pounds of produce per year. The farm is also a platform for knowledge exchange, capacity building, and relationship development in the neighborhood. It offers agricultural programs for youth, seasonal farmers' markets, and other opportunities for community members to engage with the food system.



In 2014, the Finch Hydro Corridor was recognized as a potential site to develop an urban farm by the City of Toronto. At the time, Toronto Public Health, Toronto Urban Growers, and other community organizations had recently proposed a pilot project to use public land for urban agriculture. This proposal had the secondary goals of establishing a template for lease agreements between the City and Hydro One (to allow for future urban farms) and streamlining the environmental assessment and approval process. This contributed to the creation of the City's Community Engagement and Entrepreneurial Development (CEED) Gardens Program, which works to establish small-scale farms, or market gardens, in hydro corridors.

The transformation of the Finch hydro corridor into a community-friendly green space began within the same year. The CEED Garden Program initiated a seven-year process of community consultations, negotiations with stakeholders, environmental assessments, and other preparations. In April 2021, the Malvern Urban Farm was inaugurated. Today, it continues to flourish as a vibrant and successful community urban farm.





CEED Garden Program

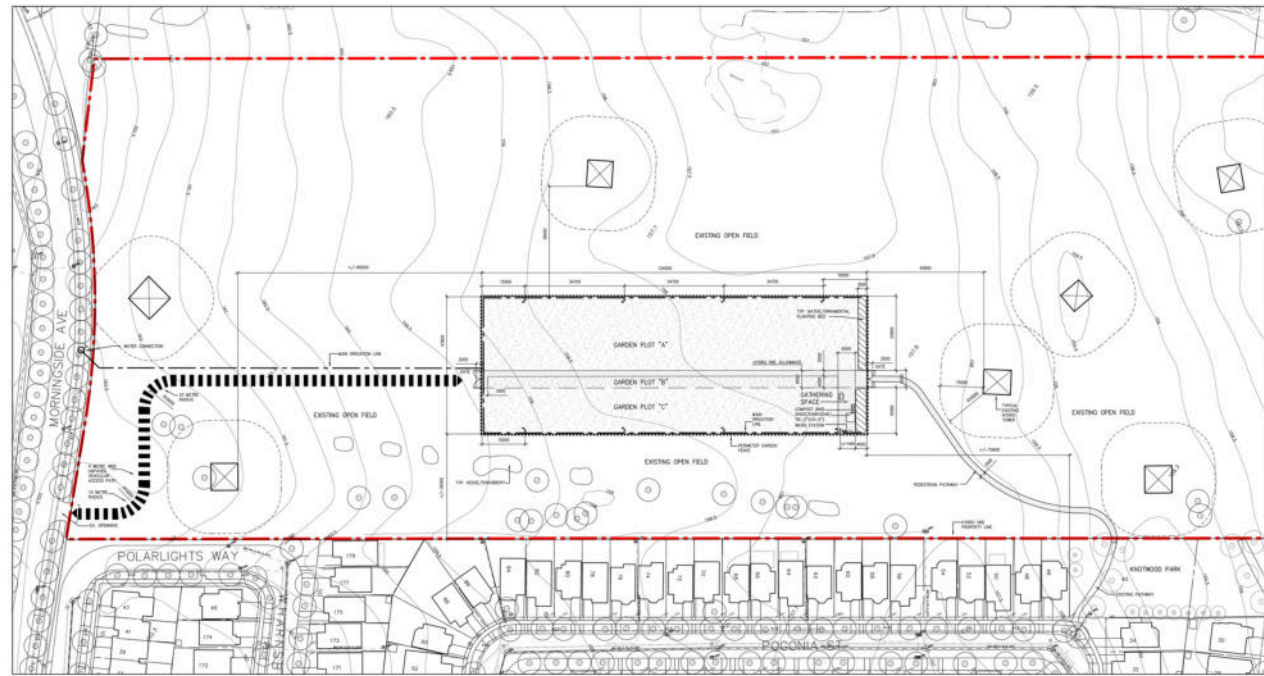
Community and allotment gardens have long been present in hydro corridors, but through the CEED Garden program, people were enabled to sell the food they harvested from these lands for the first time. This program supported the arrangement of land lease agreements in order to support community economic development. In order to establish these agreements, program officers mobilized technical knowledge and material resources to assess land quality and suitability, addressed permits and liability issues when designing the sites, and installed the necessary infrastructure to activate urban agriculture projects. Additionally, the program raised funds and engaged in consultations to foster community consensus and stewardship over the food-growing sites.

PUBLIC ROAD, LANE, WALKWAY LINE	MUNICIPAL NUMBERS CONFIRMED/CONVENIENCE	90 / (90)
NAMED PRIVATE ROAD, LANE, WALKWAY LINE	WATERCOURSE	
PROPERTY BOUNDARY	DRAINAGE FEATURE / POND	
CURBS / EDGE OF PAVEMENT	CATCHBASIN	
UNPAVED ROAD / PATH	DOUBLE CATCHBASIN	(2)
BRIDGE	FIRE HYDRANT	•
RAILWAY TRACK	POLE (GENERAL)	•
STREETCAR TRACKS (T/C)	TELEPHONE POLE	•
BUILDING / GARAGE	TRAFFIC LIGHT	•
HERITAGE BUILDING	LIGHT STANDARD	•
	TRAFFIC AND LIGHT POLE	•
	ELECTRIC POLE WITH OR WITHOUT TRANSFORMER	•

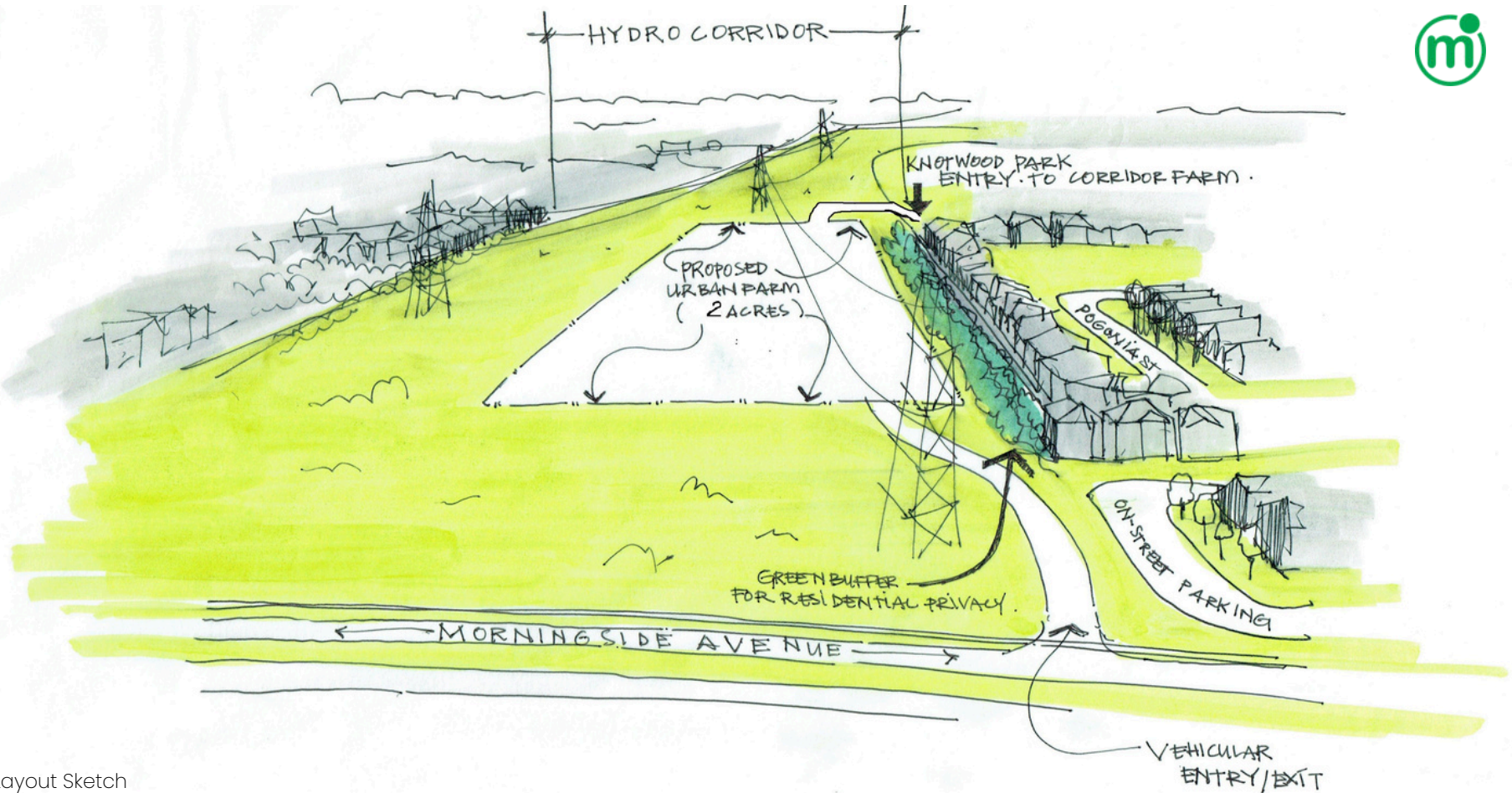
EXISTING CONDITIONS LEGEND
FROM PROPERTY DATA MAP SERIES, CITY OF TORONTO, GEOSPATIAL COMPETENCY CENTRE

EXISTING HYDRO TOWER	PERIMETER GARDEN FENCE - 2440 HIGH PLASTIC DEER FENCE WITH WOOD POSTS. SEE SUPPLEMENTAL NOTES.
15M CLEARANCE FROM EXISTING HYDRO TOWERS	GATES - SEE SUPPLEMENTAL NOTES.
HYDRO ONE PROPERTY LINE	MAIN IRRIGATION LINE - PLASTIC OR RUBBER - HOSE GROUND OR AT GRADE LEVEL WHERE REQ'D.
EX. PROPERTY LINE	HOSE BIB (O.P. #) 1000-1500 HIGH - SEE SUPPLEMENTAL NOTES.
EX. DECIDUOUS TREE	VEHICULAR ACCESS
EX. CONIFEROUS TREE	PEDESTRIAN PATHWAY - COMPOSITE LINETINE SCREENING. SEE SUPPLEMENTAL NOTES.
EX. HEDGE / SHRUBBERY	PLANTING BED - SEE SUPPLEMENTAL NOTES FOR MATERIALS AND SIZE.
EX. CONTOUR ELEVATION	WASH TABLE - SEE SUPPLEMENTAL NOTES FOR MATERIALS AND SIZE.
EX. SPOT ELEVATION	PONIC TABLE - SEE SUPPLEMENTAL NOTES FOR MATERIALS AND SIZE.
	COMPOST BINS - (TYPICAL # 300L x 1000H) WOOD CONSTRUCTION. SEE SUPPLEMENTAL NOTES.

LEGEND / NOTES



Market Garden Plan



Layout Sketch

A central aim of the CEED Garden Program is to improve access to fresh and culturally appropriate food in neighborhoods experiencing high rates of food insecurity. It also seeks to empower residents by creating opportunities to generate extra income, thereby fostering both economic opportunities and community resilience. Alongside Malvern Urban Farm, the program contributed to the development of Flemo Farm, located in Flemingdon Park at Don Mills and Eglinton.



Farming in Hydro Corridors



There are 13 utility corridors (also known as transmission corridors or rights-of-way, ROWs) in Toronto, mostly lined with rows of high-voltage hydro transmission towers, but occasionally sharing space with oil or gas pipelines. These corridors stretch a total length of 160 kilometers (five times longer than the Gardiner Expressway and Don Valley Parkway combined) and cover an area of almost 3,459 acres (roughly the area bounded by Queen, Parliament, Bloor, and Roncesvalles). This represents a significant amount of land, much of which is underutilized green space with the potential for additional community uses, including garden plots and cycling paths. Hydro One, and occasionally Infrastructure Ontario, possesses the land where such utilities are located.



Hydro One, the provincial electricity company, owns approximately 50,000 acres of land in utility corridors across Ontario. Hydro One has a master lease agreement with the City of Toronto, which allows the City to lease the corridors, pay rent and property taxes, and sublease the land to other users for secondary purposes. These subleases require Hydro One's approval, following environmental site assessments and assurances that the land uses do not interfere with Hydro operations (see the Secondary Use Application Process document in appendix 1 for more information). This process contributes to a complex and cumbersome procedure for creating and expanding community farms in hydro corridors. Research in this regard highlighted that this complex land lease arrangement, coupled with the costly and burdensome process of assessments and bureaucratic approvals, served as a barrier to the establishment of CEED gardens in the GTA.





Nuts and Bolts of Starting an Urban Farm from Scratch



Questions to Ask Yourself Before Setting Up a Farm

- 1 What is your target? What people would you like to involve?
- 2 How many people are interested in growing with you so far?
- 3 What are your farm's goals? What kind of programming do you want to run?
- 4 Based on your answers to 2, how large do you want your plots to be? Note: At the Malvern Urban Farm, most of the farmers have 2400 square feet of growing space, and some have 1200. This was chosen because one of the goals of the farm is to sell food and generate income for residents. So, 1200 square feet was as small as we think is possible to do both of these things, and 2400 is a good size for achieving both goals while still having room for many community farmers.
- 5 How much agricultural experience does your current staff have? Are you hiring another staff member to take over this project?
- 6 Where is your farm in relation to your office/other operations (if applicable/relevant)?

Once you've answered all of these questions, connect with your city councilor! The City and Hydro One will want to see how much support there is in the community for this project. A petition or a community meeting with the councilor will help them get on board and support your farm's development.





Bureaucratic Steps to Set Up a Farm in a Hydro Corridor

If you're looking to set up a farm in a hydro corridor, in the City of Toronto, here are some tips for where to start. These are unlikely to directly translate to other contexts/places.

- **Submit a proposal to City of Toronto, Poverty Reduction Office**
 - The Poverty Reduction Office (PRO) in the Social Development Division (SD) is the liaison between community applicants and other relevant City divisions
 - The proposal to PRO should include:
 - a written letter explaining the proposed farm, including size and operation structure, and reasons for its development. A letter of support from your city councillor and supporting documents from residents (ie. petitions, letters) should also be included if possible.
 - a sketch/map of the proposed farm location and any information about other land uses near your proposed farm
 - PRO will consult with Parks and Recreation, Real Estate Management to determine if the City owns that land, if there are any proposed uses for that site already under consideration.
 - Once internal consultations are done, PRO will let you know if you can proceed with the secondary land use application to Hydro One
- **Application for secondary land use submitted to HONI and the City of Toronto.**
 - Contact Hydro One's Real Estate group at RE@HydroOne.com with any questions you may have. A Real Estate representative will confirm the ownership of the utility corridor location and advise if the proposal is a permitted use.
 - The proponent will then be required to submit a written proposal to include contact information, a sketch/plan showing the proposed area and use, Hydro One facilities, confirmation that municipal planning consultation has occurred, and a non-refundable review fee.
 - The application review fee is \$1500+HST (\$1695).
 - Architectural drawings of the proposed site cost \$2000-\$3000.



- The proposal will undergo Hydro One's review process to ensure technical compatibility with their transmission assets. As part of the review, Hydro One may require additional studies (e.g., grounding, induction, or micro-shocks) which will be at the expense of the proponent.
 - A temporary land access permit may be required in order to conduct tests. The permit requires drawings indicating intended work for environmental tests and a new cover letter explaining the tests (see appendix). The permit costs approximately \$1500-1750.
 - Review and granting of permit takes 8-12 weeks.
 - Phase I and Phase II Environmental Site Assessments (ESA) conducted by Qualified Persons and archaeological assessments cost around \$20,000. Testing takes 4-8 weeks.
 - Review of test results submitted to HONI will take another 8-12 weeks.
- If approved, the proponent agrees to the terms and conditions of use, including payment of all applicable fees and charges.
- An agreement for the secondary land use is prepared by Hydro One and signed by the proponent and Infrastructure Ontario.
- **Receive approval for the site from HONI, the City of Toronto, and Infrastructure Ontario.**
 - If approved, HONI will forward a letter expressing their approval and terms of use. Someone from Corporate Real Estate Management/Parks and Recreation at the City of Toronto will need to sign off/confirm approval
- **Sign sub-lease for the site with the City of Toronto.**
 - City Council needs to approve a motion to grant the directors of Corporate Real Estate and Legal to execute the sublicense. A report needs to be put together to go to council. The details of this report will come from your proposal.
 - You will need to provide proof of insurance for the site including but not limited to \$5 million in general liability insurance per occurrence
- **Acquire locates to prepare for the installation of the farm**
 - Apply for locates to identify the location of underground gas, water, hydro, and electricity lines.
 -

If you aren't proposing to use land in a hydro corridor but the land you're proposing to use is owned/leased by the City of Toronto, the steps above will be roughly the same, only everything will be submitted to the City.





Budget Considerations



MFRC received grants for covering the initial work and ongoing maintenance. Considering that right now there are no discounts or supports from the city or hydro and the farmers only contribute minimally, it would be convenient for organizations hoping to start an urban agriculture project, to assess their financial frameworks and needs and a suitable funding structure. Some infrastructure and staffing costs are laid out in Table 1.

Based on the types of programming, the farm’s location, and the type of growing being done, it may be beneficial to reach out to trusted organizations that are interested in funding projects related to climate, youth well-being, and other relevant areas, to ensure the economic sustainability of the project.

Item Category	Description	Malvern Urban Farm Cost Estimates	One-Time or Repeated Cost	Total
Irrigation	Water line- can look differently depending on the irrigation system you're interested in	\$30,000	One-time	40,000
	Drip line	700	One-time	700
	Hoses and nozzles	300	One-time	300
Fencing	Deer fencing for the farm perimeter	25,000	One-time	30,000
Access	Gravel or paved road to farm gate (depends on your distance from sidewalk, demographics you're serving, etc.)			20,000

Item Category	Description	Malvern Urban Farm Cost Estimates	One-Time or Repeated Cost	Total
Tools	Shovels	60 each	Repeated	1,000
	Wheelbarrows	200 each	Repeated	2,000
	Hoes	60 each	Repeated	1,000
	Rakes	60 each	Repeated	
	Rototiller	7000	One time plus maintenance	7000
Compost		100/cubic yard	Repeated	6,000/year
Water		see City of Toronto pricing for the year	Repeated	6,000/year
Seeds	Seeds can cost a lot or a little, depending on what you're growing and how much of each thing you want to grow. Seed saving can bring this cost down	Lots of seed companies (West Coast, Johnny's) do seed giveaways for non-profits and community gardens.	Repeated	2,000
Harvesting	Different sizes of Rubbermaid or similar lidded bin to harvest and store crops in.	\$16-20 each Canadian Tire or similar store	One Time	2,000
	knives and clippers for harvesting	\$20-30 each	One time	\$600
	Elastics, bags, and pint containers for selling produce. ULINE has good bulk deals if you have the storage space	\$500	Repeat	\$500
Total cost				approx. \$104,600





Farm Operations

Roles and Responsibilities

Depending on the structure of your farm and the programming you intend to offer, you may not need all of these roles. However, these are some of roles to consider based on Malvern Urban Farm's experience.

Advisory Committee

A decision-making body for the farm comprised of local residents, representatives from the farm, stakeholder groups, and partnering institutions. Works to provide oversight and guidance, build connections and bring resources to the farm, and maintain accountability with funding partners.

Farm Manager

Staff member responsible for managing the farm infrastructure and equipment, food production, and community programming.

Lead Farmers

A handful of farmers are responsible for acting as a liaison with the advisory committee and organizational trustees.

Community Engagement Coordinator

Staff member responsible for coordinating activities with neighbourhood residents and managing community and stakeholder partnerships.

Farmers

Community members selected through an application process to grow food on the farm for a specific term. Farmers are given access to the necessary infrastructure and equipment, are responsible for maintaining their own growing space, and keep any money they make from what they grow. After their term ends, farmers can reapply or plots can be reallocated to make the space more accessible to all community members.

Food distribution and sales

Markets

Farmers can make use of farmers' markets to sell what they've grown and build their customer base. The lead agency can develop a market for the farm, or partner with nearby farmer's markets, grocery stores, or other food distribution hubs. The latter option requires access to transportation and proper coordination of harvest schedules in time for delivery.

Community Supported Agriculture

Another option is to develop a Community Supported Agriculture program, wherein consumers subscribe to the harvest of a certain farm and receive a weekly or bi-weekly box of farm goods. This approach requires building community/customer relationships ahead of time, and may be more successful after a few initial years of farming.

Donation

Any excess or surplus production can be donated to local food banks and/or other food social enterprise ventures.





Farmer training and capacity-building initiatives

- In preparation for the first growing season, develop or obtain access to training on all aspects of farm business planning (financial, labor, marketing, production), as well as hands-on training on how to grow produce in sufficient quantity and quality to generate meaningful sales and revenue.
- Offer regular capacity-building training to ensure farmers are familiar with updated methods, are able to expand the farm social enterprise model, and are provided with a platform to share information.
- Train and instruct farmers to practice low-waste farming methods.

Waste and water management

- Appropriate farm waste (e.g., spoiled crops or crop residue) can be directed to either on-site movable compost or a nearby off-site compost system. This can act as a source of in-house organic compost production, if approved under the land use regulations.
- The farm is connected to the City water supply and has to pay for water fees. As such, MFRC tries to use water as efficiently as possible by using drip irrigation, watering during the cooler parts of the day, mulching, and using rainwater where possible

Community engagement

- Set-up partnerships and develop curriculum for educational programs.
- Organize community engagement events, such as annual farm opening and clean-up days in April and October, open volunteer days in the summer, and food security programming at the farm.
- Conduct community consultations each year to improve programming, design, and integration into the community.
- Conduct marketing and promotional activities to support farmers in the commercialization of their produce.





Abbreviations

CEED = Community Engagement and Entrepreneurial Development

ECOH = Environmental Consulting and Occupational Health

EMF = Electromagnetic Field

GTA = Greater Toronto Area

HONI = Hydro One Networks Inc.

IO = Infrastructure Ontario

MFRC= Malvern Family Resource Centre

NIA = Neighbourhood Improvement Areas

ROWs = rights-of-way

SD = Social Development

TAP = Toronto Agriculture Program

TFPC = Toronto Food Policy Council

TFS = Toronto Food Strategy

TPH = Toronto Public Health

TUG = Toronto Urban Growers

Useful Links



<https://mfrc.org/community-and-family-programs/food-justice-in-malvern/>

https://sustainontario.com/greenhouse/resource-database/?_sft_initiatives=municipal-food-policy-resources%C2%A0

<https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2012/hl/bgrd/backgroundfile-48323.pdf>

<https://www.nycfoodpolicy.org/growto-urban-agriculture-action-plan-toronto-urban-food-policy-snapshot/>

<https://torontourbangrowers.org/key-documents%C2%A0%C2%A0>

https://www.toronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/9787-TO_Prosperty_Final2015-reduced.pd%C2%A0

https://www.socialplanningtoronto.org/poverty_reduction



Additional Resources

Secondary use application process (PSLUP flow chart). Retrieved from

<https://www.infrastructureontario.ca/48e215/contentassets/9ddb06c0b93f4377822900f1dc8f30f1/process-flow-chart-hydro-pslup.pdf>

